TWO KNAVES AND A QUEEN.

A Novel.

BY

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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TWO KNAVES AND A QUEEN.

CHAPTER I.

She promised him, in the last words she was ever to breathe into the beloved ear, that she would stay within doors on this morning; and see, here amidst the rushing and roaring and raving-mad mob, she is struggling fiercely to catch sight of him as he marches past.

There is a wicked senseless farce to be acted out away there in the East, and the overture these soldiers play is 'The Girl I left behind me:' farce and music are both a

bitter sarcasm. The men pretend they are marching to glory with lively hearts, and the tears trickle down the little drummer's cheeks as he rattles away at his drum. 'I will return safe home again,' sing the fifes. It is a lie! You will fight and starve and weep your heart's blood; but never, never more shall you return.

The poor women are not cheated by these fine colours and lively strains. They see through the deceit; for has it not been their blameless fraud to smile with aching hearts, to whisper words of cheer when hope was dead—they who have watched by the deathbeds of sons and husbands and fathers? The spirited march is in their ears the most pathetic mournful dirge, never again to be heard without tears.

Paul Biron must have suspected that his wife would break her word, for his eye

scans the thousands of faces turned towards him as he steps along—seeing all, seeing none, until he catches sight of her dear eyes. Her arms are uplifted, her face is ashen, her white teeth are clenched, her eyes are wild—she is fainting. Paul steps aside quickly towards her from the ranks; but a comrade, laying a kindly hand upon his arm, says, 'You can do no good, sir. Fall in. So. You're not the only one who suffers.' Paul falls into his place, takes up the step mechanically, and drops his chin upon his breast, for his heart is numbed. Presently he turns to catch one last glimpse. No, no; she is gone! He has seen her for the last time: never upon earth will those two see each other again. *He* will return no more to the girl he leaves behind him.

When a thoughtless lad of eighteen,

Paul had excited his father's anger, and been turned out of a luxurious home to get his living in the world as he best might. Gregory Biron heard no tidings of his son Paul until, when rumours of war were current, there came to him a note written in an unknown feminine hand, telling him that his son was a private in the 1001st Foot, with yet two years of unexpired service, and imploring him to come speedily to the assistance of his unhappy daughter-in-law, Beatrice Biron.

Long since the testy old gentleman had repented his harshness ; and now he at once did what he could to redress the wrong he had done his son. But Paul would not have been bought out had it been possible to obtain his discharge. He had acted freely in everything, even to the crime of marrying ; and he felt bound, by the honour of a soldier and a gentleman, to

abide the consequences of his act. He was no craven; but he was selfish, as men are, and thought perhaps that only he was making the sacrifice. Until he was actually in receipt of marching orders, he did not realise that the real martyr was his poor little wife, and that the greatest heroism on his part would have been to retire from a position which exposed him to brief pain, but her to lasting misery.

He fell amongst the first in the battle of the Alma. But to the grimy Russian who shot a bullet into him belongs a two-fold glory; for he sped Death away over the blue seas to fair-haired, blue-eyed Beatrice, the wife of Paul. She had filled up her husband's pocket-book with envelopes addressed to herself. Several of these she had received, with letters in them which carried sunshine to the poor heart. She would suffer none to open his letters but

herself, though her trembling fingers had scarce ability to tear the envelope, such joy possessed her. The last one she was ever to have felt very thin. There seemed but a scrap of paper within the envelope. 'Never mind,' thought she; 'if he has time to send me only two or three words I am grateful.' It contained the leaf of a pocket-book. There was a deep blood-stain right across it, and a smear as though one had tried to wipe away the mark. Still the pencil writing was his, and that gave the poor wife hope and strength to read her death-warrant.

Thus ran the few words, in characters that straggled towards the end:

'Farewell, my darl—'

'Farewell!' she echoed, and sank upon the floor.

As soon as her condition was known, a doctor was sent for; but her eyes were closed for ever before she could see the son to whom she had given birth.

CHAPTER II.

I THINK that Gregory Biron's best natural quality was candour. He had no concealed vices. They all lay upon the surface like corks upon a stream—rather more noticeable when the waters were ruffled, but there for all men to see in the calmest time. You might know the old man in as short a space as it will take to read these words. He was straight for a man of sixty, tall, spare, hook-nosed, thin-lipped, clean-shaven; neat, exact, aristocratic; irascible, overbearing, tyrannical.

He was J.P., and contested a seat in Parliament. He took pride of himself and his belongings. His house was the largest, best situated, and most ugly in Berkshire;

and the grounds about it, sloping down to the Thames, were the most beautiful of all between Henley and Goring. His horses and his hounds, his gardener, and everything that was his, were all calculated to make his neighbours break the tenth commandment. His wife had been the beauty of the county whilst she was young, and he loved her better than his horse; when her charms faded he loved her less. Had she been as privileged as other of his possessions, she might have been sold; but such a disposition being, alas, impossible, they lived together unhappily. As age crept upon him, he became querulous and ill-tempered. He quarrelled with every one. He disputed with his wife until Death, by removing her, closed the argument. He quarrelled with his sons when their opinions and will ceased to be flexible. It is easy to bend an oak whilst it is a sapling; but after a time you

may strain your muscles and hurt your fingers grievously in the vain attempt to alter its natural growth, and make it grow downwards from the light. After a period of fierce contention, both sons left home. Anthony, the elder of the two, married a Gascon lady, and settled down with his wife's relations in the south of France. What became of Paul has been briefly shown. Thus Gregory Biron lived alone in the big house at Riverford.

But his temper was too stubborn to be materially affected by circumstances. His loss did not teach him humility: he was too conceited to learn anything. He made acquaintances for the purpose of getting some one to quarrel with; and he played whist for the delight of beating his antagonist, or flinging sarcasms at his unfortunate partner. If his partner were impervious to sarcasm, then Gregory would

wilfully lose the odd trick, or trump his partner's best card.

He had a great deal of natural affection, but it was for himself alone. Affection for Paul had no part in the motive that impelled him to assist his son. He felt that he was doing a noble and magnanimous action in forgiving his son and succouring his wife; and that pleased him. He had old-fashioned notions about the glory of the service, and it gratified his pride to have a son in the army. He rejoiced when Paul declined to accept a release from service; and his deepest regret when his son fell was that he had not died an officer.

Poor Beatrice, in that little time between her husband's departure and her death, was cared for to a degree which would have troubled her had not her mind been occupied with anxious thought for some one other than herself. Gregory loaded her

with presents, and carried her to Riverford, where a suite of rooms was especially prepared for her reception. He bought a pair of ponies and a phaeton for her, and insisted upon her driving for the benefit of her health and the gratification of his vanity. Of the former he spoke much; of the latter little. Beatrice was very pretty and interesting, and visitors innumerable were drawn to Riverford by curiosity—and pity—and that 'sort of thing.' Servants were devoted to her especial wants, and they left her nothing to do but to weep. They did everything for her but the one thing she wanted. Ah, who could bring comfort to her, poor little wife!

Gregory celebrated the death of his son and his son's wife in the advertising columns of the *Times;* in hatchments and feathers and hat-bands, and a broken column with a fine inscription, and all the

accompaniments and means to boot which art and the refined tastes of this age of culture suggest.

The child to whom Beatrice in dying gave birth lived, was healthy, and grew apace. A mother was found for him, and in due course he was christened Hugh. The grandfather was delighted: the boy gave him a thousand opportunities of alluding to his dear son who fell at the Alma fighting the Russian. Wherever he went he took Hugh with him; for the boy was stalwart and sturdy, and as pretty as an infant Adonis. Of Gregory's acquaintance the ladies all—excepting those who had children less charming of the same age—were enchanted with his grandson, and petted him less only than he was petted by his grandfather. The men hated the boy, and left the room to the old man, the child, and the women as quickly as possible.

Gregory chuckled, and saw envy in their obvious dislike to the boy.

Long before Hugh knew definitely what soldiers were, he was told that he one day should be one, and he fell in pretty readily with the disposition. When Gregory showed the child off, he would say, 'Now, my boy, tell us what you are going to be when you grow a man.' And the child would answer, without taking from his mouth the fruit or sweetmeat which was the preliminary bribe, 'Toldier, an' fight a Yussians.'

Gregory bought him miniature weapons, and was convulsed with merriment when he fought for liberty at bedtime, and slashed right and left at his nurse. The servants cursed young master in secret; for it was forbidden them to correct him, and he led them a dreadful life. After his successful combat with the nurse, Hugh exercised his skill with the sword upon the legs of the

footman, and found the result so amusing, that he made those dainty limbs his favourite butt; and such knowledge does experience beget, that he found it much less effective to strike upon the swelling calf than on the unprotected shin; and to that portion of Thomas's anatomy he applied himself so constantly, and with such application, that Thomas fled the unequal fight, 'one mass of blue bruises from here right down to there.'

It was a day of mingled delight and disappointment when Gregory took his grandson to London to see soldiers and a pantomime. They reached Whitehall in time to see the trooping of the colours. The old gentleman was all eagerness. He had anticipated for many days the flash of excitement that would light up his valiant little grandson's face when he saw in reality the soldiers he had so long emulated.

Hugh was not eager, but apprehensive. He had a vague sense of a retributive judgment, and considered what the result might be if the soldiers took to slashing him as he had slashed the servants.

There was a crowd collected in the square around the soldiers, who were just about to march, and Gregory Biron had to lift his grandson up to see the spectacle. The boy was heavy and limp; his chin twitched. At the moment he caught sight of the red-coated men they were raising their rifles to salute, while simultaneously the drums rolled and the band blared out. Hugh screamed with terror, seeing an ensign with a sword, whose face exactly resembled that of Thomas, the ex-footman. The child struggled frantically as he screamed, and the grandfather, fearing to drop him, held him tightly. The soldiers stepped forward, and Hugh furiously attacked his

grandfather's face with his clenched fists. Gregory dropped him quickly then, and the boy, finding himself released, took to his heels; nor could the old gentleman catch him until he was brought to bay by a policeman in Pall Mall.

The pantomime was a great success; but when, some time after, Gregory, before company, put the old question, 'What will you be, my boy, when you grow up?' the little chap replied, 'Clown at a featre; that's what I'll be.'

After this Gregory thought it high time that the boy's education should be attended to.

Between his seventh and tenth year Master Biron had many tutors—a dozen or more. At first young men were engaged, but they would not endure slavery under Hugh's dispensation. Then Gregory tried old men, thinking, not illogically, that they

must be less independent than younger and stronger tutors; but though they were not wanting in humility and submission, they were physically incapable of enduring such practical inconveniences as their pupil designed for their discomfort. As a last resource a middle-aged man was selected, and it seemed as though he really understood the business before him.

Mr. Silas Fox never lost his temper. He smiled at all times. The most trivial and the most important actions of his life were conducted gently. His smile concealed every other expression of the face from casual observers; nevertheless it was in itself capable of many varieties of expression. His disposition appeared to correspond with the serenity of his facial aspect. Every action seemed to be at the suggestion of a perfectly impartial judgment, and the logic that overspread his ac-

tions obscured the motive which prompted them. When, for an instance, he explained to Gregory Biron, on the first evening of his engagement, the origin of chilblains, and the serious consequences they entailed upon children, suggesting that soft woollen slippers during those winter months would be more healthful and pleasant to Master Biron than boots of solid leather, the grandfather had no suspicion that the new tutor had been having his shins kicked by Hugh in the afternoon, and was therefore greatly interested in the substitution of a soft for a hard casing to the young gentleman's toes. A fool would have bared his bleeding shin to the delight of that wicked, cruel, old gentleman, and have obtained no redress. But Mr. Fox was not a fool; and the next day Hugh had no terror in his foot.

Hugh disliked his tutor the first day he

saw him. But this was not surprising; he disliked slaves of all kinds intuitively, and without discredit to himself. In this country, who will be slaves deserve to be despised. Hugh would have kept no slave of a tutor had his wishes been consulted. Any but a slave could have ruled the boy and earned his love.

Master Biron, indeed, began to feel respect for his new tutor when, after some experience, he found that, sooner or later, Mr. Fox always managed to get the best of a bargain and have his own way. When his tutor advised him to do a thing, Hugh did it; but he hated Mr. Fox nevertheless, and longed for the day to come when he should go to school.

And now Gregory Biron suffered the infirmities that age brings: exercise was unpleasant to him; he could not eat, nor drink, nor sleep, with his former disregard

of circumstances and conditions. But though his physical powers were fading, his mental faculties were as bright and active as ever.

It was the phosphorescent glow that accompanies decay.

His ailments increased rather than diminished the acerbity of his mind, and he would have relished beyond everything the pleasures of society; but society had not a like relish for him. Acquaintances—friends he had none—discontinued to call upon him, and were never at home when he called upon them. This estrangement was inscrutable to the old gentleman; it was not so to Mr. Fox, whose interests were contingent upon Gregory's isolation. Every day he became more necessary to him. When he was not in a punt upon the river fishing, Gregory was within doors enjoying the company of Mr. Fox, who played piquet

and backgammon with him, and read aloud when desired. Gregory liked the stormy debates and the *Saturday Review*, and occasionally a chapter or two from Swift or Sterne. Mr. Fox certainly did his utmost to please his employer, which is indeed a servant's duty. He knew a little law, and by reference to the parish archives he discovered certain rights with regard to fishing, shooting, felling of timber, &c., which Gregory was lawfully entitled to exercise. It is true those rights exercised could do Gregory no earthly good, and would cause considerable annoyance to his neighbours; but then Gregory could stop their enjoying a privilege to which they had no right. A dozen notice-boards were forthwith affixed to the property. It was forbidden to fish beyond a certain part; shooting was strictly prohibited over an acre of scrubby barren land where game was never seen; and the

public was cautioned that the police had strict orders to take into custody any person or persons found trespassing thereon. A fine avenue of trees which bounded an adjoining estate was felled; a footway was stopped.

The gentlemen of the neighbourhood were violently angry, and wrote to remonstrate. This delighted old Biron, and he set Mr. Fox to compose answers, gentlemanly, sarcastic, legal, in which task that gentleman succeeded to his employer's entire satisfaction. 'They're as good as the *Saturday;* capital!' cried the old gentleman, rubbing his hands gleefully.

Mr. Fox was hated generally by all who knew him, and the people affected by Gregory's spite saw the tutor's hand in these works. Sir Linton Clinker of the adjoining estate got over the wire fence that divided his from Gregory's domain,

scrambled over the felled timber, pulled Mr. Fox's nose, and then gave him a kick. Mr. Fox went home smiling.

'Very pleasant man, Sir Linton Clinker,' said he.

'I never found him very pleasant,' growled Gregory.

'I thought that.'

'Why?'

'He was speaking about pulling your nose.'

'Curse his impudence! Where did you meet him?'

'Walking through your fields.'

'My fields?'

'Yes. That made it seem odd that he should speak so unkindly. Perhaps he objects to having the timber cut.'

'I'll put a stop to his walking over my fields. What can I do to him, hey? Bring an action for trespass.'

'The law requires that the trespasser shall be first warned. He has not been warned.'

'Then what shall I do?'

'There is only a wire fence between the two estates.'

'I'll have a great ditch cut.'

'A wall would be less expensive. It is true his windows look on to that part of the grounds, and a wall is unpleasant to the eye.'

'Then I will have a wall built. It shall be eight feet high.'

'Common bricks; yellow bricks would be almost too ugly.'

'Not a jot. They shall be the yellowest bricks. I never go near the place. I'll make him repent his insolence.'

'Of course you would not insult him by—' Mr. Fox paused, and shook his head with a smile.

'Wouldn't I though! Go on, Fox; go on! What the deuce are you shaking your head and grinning like a cat for?'

'I was thinking how annoying it would be if the top of the wall were protected with broken bottles.'

'By George, a splendid idea! I will have every beer-bottle in the place broken up and stuck on the top, with the red labels turned to his windows.'

By a dozen acts of this kind did Mr. Fox gratify his own feelings and render himself invaluable to his employer. He knew all Gregory's affairs, and by degrees took into his hands the whole executive management of his estate; and when at length he considered his position assured and safe, he set about relieving himself of that small but tiresome incubus, Master Biron.

To have suggested to Gregory the ad-

visability of sending the boy away to school would have caused him to keep Hugh at home; for it delighted the old gentleman to displease his best friend equally with his worst. Mr. Fox proceeded differently; knowing how ardently Hugh desired to leave home, he affected to believe otherwise, and would say to the lad, 'My dear young master, if you run over your good grandfather's flower-borders again, I must tell him; and then possibly he will send you away to a boarding-school where you will have no kind grandfather to take care of you, and where the ushers will be less attentive to your educational requirements than I am.' Of course Hugh trampled over every flower-bed in the garden after that; and under similar instigation he tied pots to the tails of domestic creatures, fired crackers in the drawing-room, half killed the cook by strewing peas on the stairs—

she had over-peppered the soup, although she knew Mr. Fox did not like pepper—and finally gave a prize Scotch colley to the son of Sir Linton Clinker.

'The boy ought to have been sent to school a year ago. Look out a school, Fox,' said Gregory.

Mr. Fox looked out a school, and himself took the boy to it, giving the master such instructions as would lead to the eradication of many vices which had been growing upon Hugh, to the discomfort of his tutor. Then Mr. Fox returned to Riverford with a sigh of relief and a smile of pleasure, and entered into his duties as secretary and steward to Gregory Biron.

CHAPTER III.

Hugh walked into the school with a strut. His grandfather had said to him at parting, 'Suffer yourself to be bullied by nobody, my boy. Remember that your brave father fell a soldier and a gentleman, and that one day you are to wear her Majesty's uniform.' It was the last of a series of lessons by which the old man thought to instil into his grandson the virtues of an old-fashioned, aristocratic English gentleman. He sought to fashion the boy after his own image; and in so doing, he felt that he was offering a compliment to the boy and society. He never said to Hugh, 'Neither bully nor be bullied; but do unto Stokes as you would have Stokes do unto you;' for that were to

acknowledge an equality of which he would not recognise the existence.

We are born tyrants; and as yet Hugh had received no direct lessons in submission, so that Gregory Biron's parting admonition was hardly necessary. He boasted outrageously the whole of the first day, was defiant as Achilles, and went to bed vastly pleased with himself. The next day he saw Smith Secundus take his caning, and retire quietly to his seat. Hugh was astonished, and asked Smith Secundus if ever he had been caned before.

'Hundreds of times. I never halloo,' answered Smith proudly.

'No man should strike me twice,' said Hugh.

'Wait till your time comes,' said Smith, nodding prophetically.

Hugh's time came shortly. He kicked and struggled to get free whilst his punish-

ment was going on, and when released, he flung an inkstand at the head of the offending master; he was taken in hand again, and thrashed until he fairly roared for mercy.

From that day he respected the strong arm of the master; but he hectored it finely amongst the boys.

'They,' thought he, 'dare not lay a finger upon me.' This went on until he refused to fag for Smith Secundus. Smith took him by the ear, received a kick on his shin, and then beat him until he swore obedience. Others of the bigger boys also helped to teach young Biron humility. With one hand they could hold his little fists, and they slapped his face until he was giddy, and pinched him until he yelled.

Then he contented himself with being a Triton amongst the minnows of the school,

but attained to that position not without a struggle. He was continually bragging about his father who fell in the Crimea; and whilst his inventive power held out, the boys listened with interest to the perilous adventures which had not happened to Paul Biron, and the astounding courage which he, poor fellow, had such brief opportunity of exhibiting. Hugh's father was with the Light Brigade at Balaklava; he was the first man who fired a gun at Inkerman. It was he who planted the English flag upon the Great Redan, and he fell pierced with twenty bullets and fighting ten Russians at the Alma. Anachronisms passed unnoticed amongst his audience, for they hated history and despised dates; but when they caught him repeating his old stories with new exaggerations, contempt took the place of admiration. Besides this, the truth became known—but not from Hugh's lips, for he,

indeed, had been kept all his life ignorant of the fact—that Paul Biron was but a private in the ranks; and a youngster who was clever with his pencil delineated the village drunkard, who was an ex-militiaman, in his official uniform embracing Hugh. There was a legend in the mouth of the soldier, 'Ah, my son, is that Hugh?' and another coming from the lips of young Biron, 'Yes, papa; but don't say you didn't fight in the Crimea.' This cartoon was stuck up in the playground, and Hugh, wedging his way through the admiring crowd of boys surrounding it, caught sight of it, and saw its significance.

'I will give any fellow my blood-alley who'll tell me who drew this,' cried he, tearing the paper down.

'I did it,' said the artist boldly.

Hugh lugged out his marbles.

'There's the blood-alley,' said he; 'and

now I'll let you have something else;' and therewith he stripped off his jacket.

Charlie Brock, the artist, was younger than Hugh, and smaller, but he was nothing loth to fight; so the boys fell upon one another and pummelled and fell, scrambled up and pummelled away again and again until Hugh was hopelessly beaten, and had to accept assistance in getting to the lavatory.

He was mortified by the indignity that had been put upon him, no less than in being beaten by a boy smaller than himself. Smith Secundus chafed his wounded vanity, and kept Hugh sore and smarting; for his own honour was concerned in the conduct of his fag.

'Your father was a common soldier, for your late tutor said so; but if he had been a tailor you should not have let a little fellow like Brock thrash you.'

'You teach me to fight, Smith, and I'll whop him,' said Hugh.

Smith trained him and taught him until he got a black eye in one of these lessons, when he naturally concluded that his pupil had as much science as was necessary. Then Hugh went in and conquered Brock easily, and himself assisted with a light heart to pump water upon the nose of his vanquished foe. Other battles followed, and the fortunes of war were generally in favour of Hugh. Happily he suffered defeats, and learned—had thumped into him—the lesson which Nature has in view when she makes lads combative. He learned to hold strength at its true value, and to see that it is better to have right on one's side than all the odds in the world.

Hugh joined readily in all the sports of his fellows, and would be behind none where pluck and daring availed. He broke

a couple of ribs in climbing after a forbidden rook's nest. He was proud of his bruises, and could show more scars than any boy in the school. It was generally he who got badly kicked at football, or had to be carried home from Hoppy or Hare and Hounds with a sprain. He was always the willing culprit to be punished for dormitory rows. The matron declared there never had been such a destructive tiresome lad in the place in all her time; yet she loved him, and was never without vinegar and brown paper for his wounds, or a good word for him when she was consulted about him in regard of his misdeeds, for he was sturdy and handsome and honest and free-handed. He acquired some modesty too, and was not more boastful amongst his companions than occasion justified. It was when he went home for vacation that he chiefly indulged his vain-glorious propen-

sities. His grandfather encouraged this vice. He laughed at the boy's school follies, listened eagerly to the history of his scars, gave him more money than he should have had, and praised the lad to his face. He made Mr. Fox wait upon him like a slave.

'Come here, Fox, and take off your young master's boots. Don't you do it yourself, my boy; you are tired. Besides, Fox is only too glad to do what he is bid. Aren't you, Fox? That's right; now take off his other boot. He's a fine handsome fellow, my boy is, and he is worthy to be waited upon by men a dozen times nobler than you. Now take those boots away, and fetch my boy his slippers. Will you have your red shoes or your blue ones? The blue, Fox. Now look alive, and fetch them.'

But for all this flattering and adulation,

Hugh wearied of home, and welcomed the last of his holiday. At school there was no flattery beyond what he bestowed upon himself; but certain virtues were practised there which, thank God, were more agreeable to the boy's nature.

'If I deserve to be kicked, I like to be kicked,' said Hugh to his chum Brock. 'If I do wrong, I'm as uncomfortable as can be until it's found out; then I get my licking, and feel as jolly as a lark after it. You remember, Brock, when we broke that lamp?'

'*You* broke it.'

'Yes.'

'And *I* got the first declensions for it.'

'Well, do you know all the time you were locked up writing them out I was perfectly miserable. I couldn't go down to the cricket-field, and I couldn't go with Harker and Brooks to bag gooseberries out

of the doctor's orchard, and I couldn't do anything except swing myself on the cross-bar. And then at last I went and told 'em that I broke the lamp, didn't I? And when you were let out and I was locked up, well, at first I was very sorry, of course, that I had spoken, for I could hear you all enjoying yourselves down in the field. You didn't stop outside and swing on the cross-bar and feel miserable, Brock! But there, when I had done the declensions and got out I wasn't a bit sorry.'

'Look here,' replied Brock, 'you need not be so jolly bumptious over your virtue. I wasn't going to sneak and say you broke the lamp; but you know precious well that I'd have given you a good licking when I got out if you hadn't told. As it was, I was locked up half the afternoon before you thought fit to be magnanimous; and so now, if you feel that you would like

to be kicked because you deserved it, turn round.'

As years passed and Hugh approached manhood, his escapades became fewer, and the grandfather had less to delight him in the holidays. Hugh boasted less and was less proud of his faults. His greatest glories were in cricket and boating, and these sports had no interest for Gregory Biron; the only purpose of such games he believed was to expand the chest and improve the physique.

'What is the use, my boy,' he would say, 'of running after a ball like a kitten, or of emulating a waterman? I would much rather hear that you had been robbing hen-roosts or fighting a bargeman. It seems to me that the educational influence of school recreation tends to develop muscle and stunt the growth of courage. You are handsome and well made, and I think you

will be an ornament to any regiment you enter; but that is not everything. You are to be a fighter like your father; not a mere ornament like the Horse Guards at St. James's, to be stuck in a box for nursemaids to languish over. Please God, there will be another European complication before I die, and then I shall hope to hear of my grandson, Hugh Biron, leading another Balaklava charge, and doing honour to the name he bears and the cloth he wears.'

But Hugh was not bellicose; he had no quarrel with the bargee; he had no desire to rob any one; and he had no ambition to be a soldier. Indeed he was planning for himself a life far different. He was developing a talent for art. He had the collective instinct of an artist, and nothing on earth could prevent him from giving off his accumulated thoughts. His nature was too generous for his mind to be of the dull

absorbent kind which takes all and gives nothing. He must share his pleasures with all, and the delightful things he saw, others must see too.

Hugh had 'chummed' with his first foe, Brock, and from him received his first instruction in art. He was permitted to assist in colouring the minor characters of that famous play, the *Miller and his Men*, as illustrated in halfpenny sheets by Mr. Skelt. Later he drew and coloured unassisted, except by counsel from the master-hand, Charlie Brock, a portrait of the Red Rover, which he sold for six taws, a pegtop, and a haft without a blade. Out of the abundant pocket-money with which his grandfather furnished him in the holidays, he bought apparatus for sketching from Nature, not only for himself but for his friend also; and the importance the easels and camp-stools gave them amongst their less gifted com-

panions and in their own consideration was a great incentive to art. They went in boldly for the most striking scenes they could find, and worked in vivid colours: their trees were green, and their skies blue, and their houses red. It was some time before they upset the canons of art; but one day Hugh painted a brown tree 'proper,' as the heralds say.

'You've painted your tree brown,' said Brock critically.

'Well, the tree is brown, and I'm sick of green. The boys are tired of trees always the same colour; besides, we can paint trees green without walking seven miles to look at 'em. I shall go in for Nature and use up the other paints, or else I sha'n't have any blue and green and red by the end of the term.'

The brown tree was a success, and from that day they began to paint in the new

style, greatly to their advantage. Their productions were much admired, and Hugh promised that if his paints held out he would paint a sunset, which he did; and the gorgeous hues suggested to one faction the 5th of November in all its pyrotechnic glory, and to the other party a transformation scene in a pantomime, 'when they light up all the coloured fires, you know.'

Gregory Biron was ill pleased with Hugh's amusement. He reminded him that he was now fifteen, and at an age to lay aside childish, girlish, rubbishy occupations, and begin to think seriously of the business of his life; and then, finding his suggestion disregarded, the irate old gentleman withdrew him summarily from civil education, and packed him off to the military training-school at Sandhurst, with instructions to Mr. Fox, who had the taking of the boy, to beg the authorities

to work the boy well, and on no account to allow him to waste his time in painting. The natural consequences of this course were that Hugh hated Sandhurst, hated soldiers and the art of war, and was now inseparably bound to his beloved mistress, Painting.

The propensity of Adam to jeopardise the happiness of the whole creation for an apple is strong in the youngest and oldest of us. Gentlemen who would cut their hands off rather than steal a penny will smuggle cigars they won't smoke. Men become polygamous as soon as ever they find themselves bound to monogamy; and children will for ever persist in crawling over the fireguard and into the fire.

Hugh was old enough to understand that he was dependent upon his grandfather, and to feel that he was bound by gratitude to conform to the desires of his benefactor.

But this knowledge made him love his grandfather and the military profession no better. He studied from a sense of duty, doggedly and not well. With a willing heart he could have compassed in a few months all he learnt in a couple of years. When he went home he felt necessitated to assume a pleasurable interest in his life and prospects, because he would not have his grandfather pained by a knowledge of his true feeling on the subject. That did not improve matters; he became disgusted with himself, and in that condition no man can work for long at anything. He corresponded with Charlie Brock, who was in London, getting on famously, he wrote, at an art-school. 'I wish for nothing, except that you were here, old boy!' Circumstances combined to make Hugh utterly detest the life before him. Looking for faults, one can see no good. None of his associates at

Sandhurst cared for his paintings, though the colouring of a foul pipe delighted them beyond measure. The only person who sympathised with him was Mr. Fox, and his fellow-feeling astonished Hugh, who previously had inclined to think ill of the man.

'There is a dash of good in every one,' thought Hugh; 'and this love of art is the yeast that leavens this heavy lump of iniquity.'

He felt he had done Fox an injustice, and endeavoured to atone for it by imposing confidence in him now. He told him of his wishes, his present dissatisfaction, and his repugnance to the career planned by his grandfather for him. He showed him all his works.

Mr. Fox could not himself draw, and he was not a good critic; but that did not particularly disappoint Hugh, whilst Mr. Fox

had such a general high appreciation of art. He bought a most expensive frame for a panel which Hugh had presented to him, and when he went to London he took Hugh's works and brought him back guineas for them, and a commission for half a dozen more if he would be good enough to paint them.

'Ah, Mr. Biron,' said Fox to Hugh, 'we are proud of our national wealth; but were we to consider how greatly money impoverishes the artistic products of a country, should we not rather regret that we are not poor? How many are there now dallying in luxurious ease, and wasting their hours in the voluptuous languor of drawing-rooms, who would not, in rags and a garret, have produced works of art, to live like the emanations of the Romans when Rome has passed away! Have not the greatest and noblest productions of past ages been

wrought when necessity drove the artist —who is by nature constituted an indolent creature—to work? It is possible that Fortune, when she deprived you of your parents, intended you should develop the genius which she gave you for a birthright. Ah, Fortune is like most mothers; she spoils her best-favoured children, and so brings them down to the dead-level of the rest!'

The words went like barbed arrows into Hugh's susceptible soul, and would not come out. Mr. Fox gave them time to rankle before he shot again.

It was the autumn vacation, and Hugh had stolen from the house with his canvas, and was sitting in a beech wood. Mr. Fox silently watched him as he rubbed in the landscape before him. Fox had begged as a favour to be allowed to accompany him. Presently Hugh said, with a sigh, 'So you think I am a spoiled child?'

'I do not ask you to agree with me, Mr. Biron. Those who are not spoiled are the first to see who is spoiled, and *vice versâ*. It is the worker who snarls at the idler. We, only, see that instead of prancing about in gay colours before the eyes of admiring women and children, you ought to be working in a dull studio, giving to the world masterpieces of art in return for dry bread; and so, whilst you thank Fortune for giving you riches, we must curse her for not suffering you to be poor.'

It is not well to overdose a patient. Mr. Fox was a clever doctor, and left Hugh to benefit quietly by the medicine he had exhibited. Hugh did not touch his canvas for some minutes, but sat with idle hands looking fixedly in the eddying water at his side, thinking of fame and art and all the romantic delight of hardships in prospective; and coming back anon to the dismal

reality of humdrum existence, the foppery of a military life in these years of peace and frippery, and the prospect of another session at Sandhurst. Often he indulged in dreamy reveries; but each dream was sweeter, each awakening more distressing, to him.

'I would I were as poor as Lazarus!' he muttered, going back to his colours.

CHAPTER IV.

Hugh worked steadily for half an hour. His work occupied his attention without engrossing it, and left his mind scope for vagrant fancies and dreamy observations. He could think vaguely of the future, and he smelt the meadow-sweet as the bee burrowed noisily into the soft trusses of bloom and stirred up its fragrance; he noted the cooing of the wood-pigeons, and the splash as a fish leaped from the water. The afternoon was hot; but a deliciously cool breeze crept under the trees where he sat, and made music in the beech leaves above. But for these sounds there was nothing to disturb him now that Mr. Fox had retired. Hugh was painting a stretch of back-water,

all low tone and deep shadow. 'It wants a figure,' thought he. 'I suppose I must put in the harmless necessary old man fishing.'

At that moment he caught the sound of movement in the grass behind him.

'Some one coming; perhaps the very figure I want,' thought he, turning about.

A thicket shut out the view; he rose from his seat and looked over. A young girl stood there. He could not see her face, but her hair was shining and soft, and, being knotted back tightly, displayed a pink ear and a few inches of white neck. There was every reason to believe her pretty, for women have, as a rule, the good taste to conform their dress to their personal appearance, and her neat dress affected in a rustic manner the fashion of the town, fitting her dainty waist and graceful shoulders to a nicety. Her back was turned towards

Hugh; her body was bent in a pretty attitude of apprehensive timidity, and she held behind her—a pair of stockings.

Hugh sat down with a blush, for he was as modest as a girl, and considered what he should do in this embarrassing position. To move or to intimate his presence by making a noise would not improve matters; no, the best thing was to go on with his painting as if she were not there, and leave the rest to chance. If she found him she could then beat a retreat, with the comfort of thinking she had not been seen.

Hugh took his brush and essayed to paint, but from some cause—he knew not what—he found himself unable to take interest in the work. His touch did not improve the picture. He could do no more to it, and yet it was incomplete. It was but a background after all, and certainly wanted a figure. If the girl he had seen would

only stand for a while whilst he sketched her in that pretty, timid, nymphlike pose, what a capital subject she would make! He might try to reproduce her from memory, if only he could remember what kind of hat she wore. There could be no harm in looking at her hat, and satisfying himself on that point.

There was a dabbling sound as Hugh rose to his feet, and he perceived that the girl had seated herself on the bank and was dipping her feet in the water.

How very pretty she looked! Her hair, which inclined to redness, was drawn close to her head, save where in front some little tresses had obtained liberty, and were fluttering in the light wind about her white brow. Her cheek was round and pink, her lips were full, and her small nose had impudence in its curve. Presently she lifted her feet from the water, and put them side by

side; then throwing her head on one side she regarded them critically. They gleamed like ivory, and she must have been pleased with their appearance, for she held them stretched out for some moments, and smiled pleasantly upon them the while. It was to Hugh simply the daintiest little picture he had ever seen, and he looked without the will to move.

She dropped her feet in the water, sank upon her elbow, and began singing a country-side song. Hugh caught only the rhymes, which were 'caow,' 'plaough,' 'treu,' and 'yeou;' but the voice that sang them seemed to him prettier than the piping of a robin. He sat down, waited, listened. The pattering in the water ceased, there was a movement on the grass, and she began to hum her tune again. The voice approached, and Hugh became marvellously active with his brushes; the tune ceased

suddenly in a little exclamation of astonishment near him. He looked up, and met a pair of eyes glancing sidelong skeerily at him. Both looked rather confused, coloured, looked down, and the young lady pursued her path. Where the path diverged she turned her head for a minute, and both, finding their glances met once more, smiled. Oh, what a subtle sense of humour young people have! We old folks, turning about to stare after each other, can see nothing to make us laugh.

'May I have the pleasure of accompanying you this afternoon, Mr. Hugh?' asked Mr. Fox, the next day.

'Well, the fact is—' said Hugh, scratching his head, and trying to look as if he were not prevaricating, but without success—'the fact is that, unless I can settle down to my work more readily than I did yes-

terday, I shall look about for a new subject.'

'Ah, in that case of course you require to be perfectly free from interruption of any kind,' said Mr. Fox.

'Well, that is true.'

'Y-es.' Fox smiled his blandest, and said to himself, 'Why on earth does he want to go alone?'

He was more than usually amiable and interested in art when Hugh returned; and although the artist declared he had done nothing much—stuck to the old thing, you know, after all—never mind looking at it—nothing in it, and so on, Mr. Fox obtained a glimpse of the picture, and was at once interested.

'Oh, I see,' he smiled. 'You have introduced a figure.'

'Little fancy thing to throw up the background. I thought it was required.'

'So it was indeed, Mr. Hugh. Done from imagination, hey? Very easy pose. The folds of the dress are wonderful; you might fancy they were copied from the real thing.'

He pulled his nose and admired the picture with half-closed eyes, as he wondered where he had seen a dress like that on Hugh's canvas; then he said,

'I suppose you will hardly have to finish this where you began it, as the figure is from imagination.'

'If I finish it at all, I must. You can't get the—er—tone, the—er—atmosphere, unless you are actually in the scene you paint.'

'That shows my ignorance of art, of course. I see you are quite right, quite right.'

Mr. Fox had to go to Reading the following afternoon—a necessity which Hugh

did not regret—but he took a route in returning which led him so near the backwater which Hugh was studying, that he got a clear view of his young friend and a companion that stood beside him. The companion was a young lady, and she seemed deeply interested in Mr. Biron's work.

'Mattie Blake,' said Mr. Fox softly; and he smiled, though there was none to benefit by it.

He had chosen the path upon the side of the beech-wooded hill. There stood a free-growing brier near, through the interstices of which one might command a view of the river-side below and be unseen; and dry leaves about it offered a tempting seat to the weary pedestrian. Mr. Fox stepped to the brier and seated himself slowly, blinking like an old cat that settles down to watch the play of unconscious mice.

Unfortunately, he could not make out the words they used; but he could hear their voices and distinguish between Miss Blake's and Hugh's. Hugh had most to say; Miss Blake answered briefly and laughed considerably. Very likely he talked nonsense; but most girls like nonsense, especially from a brisk handsome young fellow.

Mattie was accustomed to hearing nonsense; for her father kept the Ferry-boat Inn, and she waited upon the gentlemen who assembled in the coffee-room of evenings to sing and discourse. These gentlemen were the shopkeepers of the village; Sir Linton Clinker's coachman and steward; Mr. Tom Reynolds, Gregory Biron's head gardener; occasionally Mr. Fox; and such boating gentlemen as were staying in the house. Of this society she mostly affected Mr. Tom Reynolds. He was a Hercules in appearance; ruddy of complexion, broad-

shouldered, deep-chested, with ponderous limbs, and short crisp curling hair that clustered low down on his broad forehead; the finest and strongest man of that place, and the village champion of cricket and quoits. Mattie felt proud to have the giant under her subjection. But he never rose above the intellectual level of the village people; indeed he said less to Mattie than those who were not so interested in her. When he entered her presence he said 'Good-evenin', miss;' and supplemented his salutation by such remarks upon the weather as were appropriate to the season. His eye followed her wherever she went, and he drank ten times as much ale as he needed, merely for the pleasure of touching her hand when he paid for it. He sang the 'Red, White, and Bleu' every night of the week except Sundays, growing pale when asked to sing, and beginning with every

indication of breaking down in the first verse, as he stared fixedly on Mattie; but when, by dint of turning his glance away and setting it upon her father, who always returned his stare, shuffling uneasily in his chair under the basilisk eye, he regained self-possession, his powerful voice was not to be contained within four walls. At parting he, in common with other village-folk, shook hands with Mattie; and when occasion permitted he said, 'Yeu deu look so pretty to-night, miss.' The other gentlemen were less constrained, but their remarks were matter-of-fact and their compliments broad.

These admirers were as inferior to Mr. Hugh Biron intellectually as they were in personal appearance.

Hugh held an easy flow of small talk, and dashed it with sentiment and poetry, which were not less appreciated by Mattie,

perhaps, because at times she could not quite understand what he meant. His compliments were delicate, and his voice soft and musical. There were refinement and taste in everything connected with him. His linen was spotless, his clothes well-fitting and good, his hands were long and white, and even at this early stage of their acquaintance she knew that they were soft and smooth. How different from the horny palm of Mr. Tom Reynolds! And there was the slightest suspicion of scent when Hugh approached her that made her think disparagingly of the earthy smell Mr. Tom Reynolds brought into a room with him. Hugh was never abashed; he never faltered in speaking to her, and when their eyes met hers had to fall, not his. She was better pleased to have Hugh for a master than Tom for a slave. Women love above them, never below. Instances exist of

parallel predilection amongst the inferior animals. Even the sparrow will not accept a mate who cannot thrash her.

In comparison Tom was a heavy ox; Hugh a nimble high-spirited horse. Ladies hate 'bulls' instinctively, albeit the creature they shun is the meekest sweet-eyed beast, patient in tilling the soil, useful and harmless; but no lady sees a prancing horse without a desire to pat his neck and caress him, despite the knowledge that he may kick and bite, and will probably run away from her if he can.

When Hugh was saying good-bye he found several questions to ask about Miss Blake's arrangements for to-morrow; but he held her hand, although the parting salutation was said. He was as conscious as Mattie was that he held her hand beyond the customary length of time; she could read that in his eyes when she dared

to look up to them. Besides, he exercised rather more pressure than was absolutely consistent with forgetfulness. She had answered all his questions, and he yet held her hand. She tried to disengage it. It was but a pretence; she did not want to remove her hand.

'How odd!' said Hugh; 'I have been holding your hand all this time.'

He looked at the hand still in his, and was about to say, 'What a pretty little hand!' as an excuse for kissing it, but he found it rather large and decidedly red, so he turned his eyes to her whiter and softer and prettier face.

'Your cheeks are like pink-and-white apples that tempt one to feast,' said he.

She blushed, but did not move, although she saw his lips approaching. Only when he had kissed her and dropped her hand, she turned upon her heel and ran away.

Mr. Fox rose refreshed, and walked home. He was in high spirits; and in the evening went to the Ferry-boat, and took a seat beside the host. He bowed with polite deference to Mattie, and remarked as he did so that the young lady flushed. He spoke of his dear young master, Mr. Hugh Biron, and noticed that she became at once interested.

'You don't know him, Mr. Blake, do you?' questioned Fox.

'Nao,' said Mr. Blake, in a tone of voice that signified he did not regret the loss of his acquaintance.

'He daon't trouble you much,' suggested Sir Linton Clinker's man.

'Nao,' responded Blake, in the same tone, his eyes fixed on the bowl of his long clay.

'He is a noble young man,' exclaimed Fox; 'the handsomest, cleverest, most ge-

nerous and warm-hearted gentleman in the county.'

'Then he daon't take arter the old man,' said Blake, with an emphatic nod.

'The offsprings are frequently unlike their parents,' said Mr. Fox, glancing at Mattie; 'and I daresay you can tell us, Mr. Reynolds, of many peculiarities of the same kind in botanical life. For instance, the seedlings from a streaked pelargonium may be perfectly white.'

'Yes, and some on 'em has spots,' replied Tom Reynolds, interested rather in establishing a fact than in assisting allegory.

'Of course, and *vice versâ*.'

'Never heerd o' them; but carnations will, so'll picotees.'

'Just so. And thus it is with this Mr. Hugh. I may say, without disrespect to my employer, that his grandson is unlike him in every respect.'

'Good job too,' said the representative of Sir Linton Clinker.

Now, the feud between the Birons and Clinkers extended to their servants, and there were frequent skirmishes between Tom Reynolds and Sir Linton's George.

'What Master Fox says is quite treu,' said Tom Reynolds. 'The young governor is the finest young fellow in these parts, and you've got no one to match him on yeour side of the brick wall.' Tom looked straight at the corner of the ceiling, but his remark was intended for him of the rival house of Clinker.

'And he'll be not only the handsomest and noblest man of these parts, but the wealthiest,' said Mr. Fox.

'Sooner the better,' said Sir Linton's man.

'I call upon Mr. Reynolds for a song,' said the host, who saw dissension breeding.

Mr. Fox was alone with Hugh for a few minutes before going to bed, and he mentioned his visit to the Ferry-boat.

'You don't go there?' said he. 'Ah, it is hardly the place for a gentleman like you. I have not heard you speak of Miss Blake, and of course you would, had you seen her. The most marvellously beautiful girl I have ever seen. You think that an old fellow of my age should do something else than trouble his head about women. It is only my head that is concerned, sir, not my heart. Were I younger, that might go too.'

'Is the young lady very beautiful?' asked Hugh, with ill-affected unconcern.

'To my eyes she is peerless. One of those exquisite faces that strike you with their intrinsic beauty less than they suggest the grace, delicacy, and sweetness of a pure feminine mind. You understand me, sir?'

'Thoroughly. That is what I—I—I—what I always think so beautiful in women's faces.'

'Precisely. The family is very old—good stock—connected with the historical family of the same name. Unfortunately, the position of the father must materially hinder the development of the daughter's intellect; nevertheless there she is—a gem. Alas, poor girl! it may be that, falling into the possession of some unlettered clod, without the ability or the desire to improve her, her real and true value may be never known. On the other hand, some man of feeling—some man who looks beneath the surface before he rejects the stone that falls in his way—may by the mere polishing discover himself the possessor of such a diamond as shall blaze a Kohinoor amongst diamonds. Ah me! why do we grow old? Good-night, Mr. Hugh.'

At that moment Hugh was not sufficiently in love to be critical about the social or intellectual status of Mattie Blake, nor did he need argument to convince him that she was charming. He was interested of course in what Mr. Fox said.

We take a handful of dry seed and a handful of moist earth, and wonder how anything beautiful can spring from the simple union of the two; but the result is clearly seen by the cultivator. Mr. Fox's seed was sown on good soil and took root, threw out leaves, grew, blossomed, bore fruit, and all within a fortnight. By that time Hugh loved Mattie madly, and she returned his passion—less ardently perhaps, because she was less poetical, and the passion was not so novel to her. He became concerned about her pronunciation of certain words, her abuse of the letter *h*, the unnecessary emphasis she sought to obtain

by the multiplication of negatives, and her ignorance of classical literature. Under the trees he read Keats and Tennyson to her, and for her private study gave her handsome copies of Shakespeare and Thackeray, hoping these would wean her from literature of the penny-a-week sort. Mattie struggled bravely to like Shakespeare and read him. With womanly instinct she began at the end of the book, as being the most interesting part of books in general, and she cried with mortification in the vain endeavour to understand the Sonnets. She got on better with Thackeray; but a page and a half invariably sent her to sleep, and she dreamed of the baronets and beetle-browed villains of the penny weekly. Better still, she liked to listen to Hugh reading; for he explained matters to her as he went on, and his voice was musical and sweet and pleasant to the ear, as his appearance was

to the eye. After listening for a while she would playfully curl his soft hair, and then he shut up the book and put his arms about her, and talked poetry that was ever so much prettier than the laboured efforts of genius, and this she loved most of all. She could rest her head upon his shoulder, and hearken for hours to his secondhand similes and boyish balderdash. Hugh liked it too; it was flattering to be so appreciated, and to make poetical steam and let it off was no trouble, and, on the whole, very natural and pleasing.

Mr. Fox rather assisted than impeded the communion of his young friends; but when Hugh's vacation was drawing to an end, he saw fit to stir up the pellucid stream of true love and place a few obstacles in its course. So amiable a man as he could not see Tom Reynolds hipped and low-spirited without commiseration.

'Why, Reynolds,' said he, finding him in the hothouse one morning, 'how is it you were not at the Ferry-boat last night, hey?'

'I'm not a-going there no moare,' said Tom, shaking his head ruefully.

'How is that? I thought you were fond of Miss Blake.'

'I wars, Master Fox, I wars. I've alwust got good wages, and I'm a saving man, and I've got enough money for to start a little business and make a comfortable home for teu folks; and I made up my mind a time since that I'd marry the gal, if so be she was agreeable so to do, and, fact, I've as good as told her so every night for six months past, I have. I won't repeat my words, Master Fox, but I have a-said something to her at parting every night, by which she might see what my feelings was towards. Fact, I did mean afore long to ask her per-

mission to allow me to walk out on Sundays with her. I don't know what it is, sir, but something turned that gal's head quite raound this last month. You might have noticed, Master Fox, how she do turn her nose up at every one. She never smiles when she takes your money now; and she knocks the glasses about when a party's singing the "Red, White, and Bleu," which is a patriotic song, and ought to be treated serious, and she leaves the room without saying "Good-bye" to no one.'

'It is the way with all women, Reynolds; they love to make us miserable to prove how necessary they are to our happiness. You be a man, and don't give in to her; she will come round quickly enough when she finds you will not. Stay away a few days, and don't send any more flowers.'

'I don't send her no flowers, Master Fox.'

'That is odd. She had a piece of stephanotis like this, and a piece of maidenhair like that, in her bosom last night. I suppose Sir Linton Clinker's George must have given them to her.'

'He daresn't, no more daresn't any other man. They know what I am pretty well; they knaow haow I served young Adams when he shuck hands with her.'

'I suppose she has a plant of her own —very likely; why not? As I said, you show the girl that you are as good as she, and you will soon see that she thinks you a good deal better. Good-morning, Reynolds. Oh, by the way, do you go to dinner through Quarry Wood?'

'No, sir—never go that way, it's teu fur; but I can go that way if so be you require anything.'

'Well, Mr. Hugh is painting down there, and—No, I had better go myself.'

Left to himself, Tom Reynolds thrust his hands into his pockets, and gave himself up to unpleasant speculation. Who had given Mattie flowers? She had no stephanotis of her own, he knew. Suddenly he started from his pensive attitude, remembering that Hugh had cut a spray of the flower and a fern on the previous morning. Not an hour since he had cut the best rose he could find in the house. If he were painting he would not wear a flower in his coat. After a few minutes of agitated indecision, Tom Reynolds started off for Quarry Wood. Mr. Fox was strolling towards the Ferry-boat, and saw the gardener leap over a stile and cross the meadow leading to the Wood. It made Mr. Fox smile; and the pleasant expression had not left his face when he called upon Mr. Blake and asked to have a few minutes in private with him.

Mr. Fox's solicitude in the business of other people did not end there. From the Ferry-boat he hastened to Riverford and sent a servant with a note to Hugh, begging half an hour's conversation, upon a most important subject, in his own room. Hugh answered the note in person, and took a seat with some formality. His nostrils were white, and he fingered his watchguard nervously, as Mr. Fox addressed him.

'My dear Mr. Biron,' said Fox, 'I have asked for this interview with the hope that I may have yet sufficient influence with you to retrieve an error, of which I feel myself the unintentional and unhappy cause. I remember full well speaking in high and unguarded terms of praise respecting a young lady—not to be formal—Miss Blake, the daughter of the village innkeeper. What I said was sufficient to inflame the curiosity of one less impressionable than

you, and I now find that my unwise, my unfortunate, my inadvertent remarks, have led to the most deplorable consequences. This afternoon I learnt of your acquaintance with Miss Blake, with such particulars as compel me to put a construction upon your motives unworthy to yourself.'

'You have said enough, Mr. Fox,' said Hugh, rising. 'Reynolds, the gardener, said less than that, and I would have knocked him down but—'

'But that Miss Blake threw herself between you. Reynolds told me so. But I think *I* do not stand in need of her protection.'

'It would be as useless a compliment to hit you as it would be to reason with a great hulking bullock like Reynolds. We speak to men and brutes in such a manner that they understand what we mean. Perhaps it will be sufficient to tell you to mind

your own business and hold your tongue for the future. Do you understand? And listen to this,' continued Hugh, who, now that he was roused, did not know how to leave off: 'you will do well to correct yourself of an error which you share in common with many thousands of ignorant and vulgar people—gentlemen are not necessarily blackguards.'

'Did I suggest that they are?' asked Fox, with a smile. 'On the contrary, by asking you to reason upon this matter, I show that I think they are not. I know that you are a gentleman as well as I know that you are young, and that young people are thoughtless, and that thoughtless people are selfish. Mr. Biron, if I have done you an injustice I will sink here at your feet upon my knees and beg forgiveness. I ask you to answer only one question, and that is, what do you think will become of this

poor girl?—Let me speak, then leave me unanswered, or strike me, if you will. You have simply flirted with this girl—from my soul I believe that is the extent of your familiarity—but, my dear young master, you have won her love, how deeply you may guess when I tell you that for you she has defied the authority of her father and refused a husband.'

'God bless her!'

'Amen. Now, how will you, a gay young cavalry officer, compensate her in her solitude for the loss of a father's love, a husband's, children's love, and the joys of a humble home suited to her social position? What can you offer her? I ask.'

'Marriage.'

'Nonsense, sir!' cried Fox, sinking into a chair with every semblance of intense astonishment.

'Whether or not, I shall marry her.'

'You are not nineteen.'

'I suppose I shall grow older.'

'Again, sir, I must ask you not to consider yourself, but this poor girl. Supposing that in a couple of years' time you should marry her, what kind of happiness could you give her exclusive of your own companionship? You must have observed that few married people retain their romance for many years of their united life. Society is necessary to both. To you, who may at any moment become the possessor of this large property, the society of the neighbouring gentry will be indispensable. But your wife, what friends can she have? Only *parvenus*, who will overlook the fact that her father keeps a neighbouring alehouse. Better men and women, whilst they appreciate you, will slight her, and her life will be a misery. Wealth is a curse to a man so united. You would find,

too late, the awful and, allow me to add, the wicked error you had made. Were you no more than an artist, I would not say a word, for the girl may be educated to your own standard; but heir to thousands, I tell you, in defiance of my own interests and regardless of the consequences, you are acting unwisely and unholily!'

'Have you anything more to add?' asked Hugh.

'Nothing.'

Without a word, Hugh turned about and left the room. Once more smiles lit the face of Mr. Fox.

The following morning Mr. Blake put on his best velveteens, polished his boots, and trudged up to Riverford. He had not spoken to his daughter since the expression he had given his feelings on the preceding evening, and his preparations for his visit to Gregory Biron were conducted in a

silence only broken by a low whistling, and were watched by poor Mattie with terror. He went off whistling, and she sat down to cry.

Gregory Biron listened to the recital of his grandson's philandering with delight.

'And this is haow things stands,' concluded Mr. Blake; 'my gal, she throws away the best chance she's ever had, and jilts her lover for your grandson.'

'Shocking!' said Gregory, slapping his knees.

'She flies in my teeth.'

'Most undutiful.' Gregory rubbed his hands.

'She goes out the whole day a-sweethearting in the woods.'

'Young hussy!'

'She offends my best customers. Won't have anything teu say t' 'em, and stands in a fair way of ruinin' herself for ever.'

'Oh, this is very shocking!' said Gregory, trying to look as if he meant it. 'Well, Blake, I suppose you want a cheque or something, hey?'

'Nao, I don't want nao cheque nor no money o' yours; I want you to have your boy in and say to him, afower me, as how you won't have nao moare of it.'

Gregory agreed, and Hugh in answer to a message presently entered the room.

'Sit down in that easy-chair, you young rascal,' said Gregory cheerfully; 'I am ashamed of you, sir. Here is this good man come to tell me that you are ruining his trade, perverting his daughter's filial affections, and playing the deuce with his business and the girl and all that. And I have called you before me now to reprimand you severely. Do you understand me, you wicked young Turk, you? If I hear of your repeating this, I shall—I shall

—well, I don't know what I shall do with you.'

'But I know what I shall deu,' said Mr. Blake, extracting his hat from the legs of the chair and rising. 'If I catch you making a fool of yourself and my daughter, I shall just hit you with this stick; and I shall give my Mattie a taste of the strap —she's not too old to learn; and I shall pack her off to London as a domestic servant; that's what I shall do, and so good-mornin'.'

'Curse his impudence!' cried Gregory, when Blake had slammed the door. 'If he hits you, you hit him, Hugh, my boy. But you must give the girl up—that's only moral.'

'I cannot give her up,' said Hugh firmly.

'Why, you young Don Juan, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!'

'I ought if I were to give her up after having won her love. I must marry the girl, sir.'

'Marry the daughter of a pothouse man!' screamed Gregory.

'I have told her I will, and I must and shall.'

'Don't be a fool, Hugh! Well, I suppose I might as well say don't be a young man, don't have hot blood in your veins, don't be my grandson. You don't mean to marry her yet awhile, I suppose?' he said, with sarcasm.

'Miss Blake is willing to wait three years.'

'By George, I should think she was! Well, three years in an officer's quarters may alter your matrimonial views.'

'They might; but I have resolved, sir, not to be a soldier.'

'What?'

Hugh bowed in silence.

'What do you propose doing?'

'I intend to get my living by painting.'

The old man's lips worked vainly for some moments to utter the crowd of imprecations and reproaches that struggled for supremacy in his thoughts; and then, with something like a howl, he snatched up his glass of port and flung it at his grandson.

Hugh went up-stairs, packed his portmanteau, and sent it to the railway station. Then he returned to his grandfather, and in a few calm words repeated his determination of getting a living by his exertions, and regretted that he was unable to do so without offending. Gregory replied with entreaty and threat, and finally bade him go to the devil in as few words.

When he was gone he called for Mr. Fox, and bade him send for the lawyer at once:

'The beggar sha'n't have a penny of mine!' said he, nibbling his nails furiously.

'You will surely change your mind, relent, forgive him.'

'Get out of the room, Fox! May I die before I change my decision!'

'I hope you will,' said Mr. Fox to himself as he left the room.

CHAPTER V.

It is doubtful if Gregory Biron was justified in cursing his stars for the disobedience of his grandson. It vexed him, no doubt, to have his authority disputed and his schemes thwarted; but then to a mind constituted as his was vexation itself was a pleasure, and the means by which he strove to assuage it afforded a mental excitement that he needed. There is certainly as much pleasure in giving kicks as halfpence if your temperament is bellicose.

For some months there had been nothing to provoke Gregory's anger seriously, and attributing his drowsy inactivity to decay of his natural parts, he became low and despondent of spirit. The disaffection

of Hugh at once restored to him his wonted vigour and energy.

He sent for his solicitor and cancelled the will which he had made in favour of Hugh, wrote a dozen others and cancelled them *seriatim*. The disposition of his money troubled him. Could he have regarded money as in truth a curse and the root of all evil, he would have bequeathed it readily enough; but holding it in a less philosophic estimation, he found it impossible to avoid conferring an advantage contrary to his inclination. He would have left all to the State but that he disliked the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Public charities he objected to.

The only private individual he could tolerate was Mr. Fox, and it seemed probable that to him Gregory Biron would finally will all he had. It gave the old gentleman much pleasure at this time to make a will

in favour of Mr. Fox on Monday, and cut him off with a shilling on Tuesday, thus keeping his unhappy secretary in a state of constantly fluctuating hope and fear lest his tormentor should die suddenly on the wrong day.

But this was not the only anxiety which Mr. Fox had to bear.

One morning there came to Riverford a thin paper letter, addressed to Gregory Biron in an angular hand and bearing a French stamp and postmark. But few letters came to the house, and Mr. Fox read them all.

The postman never quickened Gregory's pulse with hope or fear. There was something almost pathetic in his apathy in this regard, so different from ordinary men, so significant of utter friendlessness and unsympathetic relation with mankind. He was content that Fox should read and an-

swer his letters, and bother him as little as necessary with their contents. They all related to business or begging.

Mr. Fox prided himself upon knowing Gregory Biron's affairs better than he himself did; but this letter perplexed him. He held it before him for some minutes in doubt; and then broke the envelope with a foreboding of evil. He took out the neatly-folded paper, opened it delicately, and read:

'*Marseille*,

'*Rue de la Savaterie*, *No.* 12 (*3me étage*).

'Dear Grandpapa,—'

Mr. Fox dropped the letter with a moan, then turned to the signature, pursed his lips and dilated his nostrils, as one preparing for the worst, and read again:

'Dear Grandpapa,—My darling papa,

your son, Roger Biron, is dying in the miserable hospital here. They will not let me see him; no, not for one moment, my poor kind father. He has been ruined by the cruel floods, quite ruined; and he was carrying me to England to beg your forgiveness and charity, when now, behold! he is attacked by the fearful malady. And what am I to do—I, who may not see my father, to give him one last, last kiss? I have not the sous to buy immortelles or flowers for the coffin of my dearest. O my grandfather, if from you my papa has inherited his sweet kindness and gentleness, then I know you will pity us, you will send help at once. You will come to weep over your son's grave and be a comforter to your poor granddaughter,

'René Biron.'

Mr. Fox read the letter again, then

folded it slowly as he planned an answer. After a few moments of deep thought he rose, put the letter in the fire, returned to his seat, and wrote a brief but emphatic letter. He was pleased with his composition, and closed the envelope as if he were at the same time closing the whole affair. He took a pen, and found that he could not recollect the address in the letter he had imprudently burnt. He was mad with vexation, yet not a syllable of the address could he recall, so presently his own letter had to follow poor René's. Two days later came another letter, in a different hand, from Marseilles. Mr. Fox retired to his room and tore open the letter, trembling. The address he recognised at once, wondering how he could have failed to remember it. The contents ran thus:

'Dear Sir,—On behalf of the fatherless

I am bold thus to address you. Your son, Roger Biron, died yesterday, and his daughter looks for support to Heaven and to you. Your granddaughter is young, she is beautiful, she is unprotected; on every hand men will tempt her to destruction. If you decline to protect her, see what a task you impose upon the good God. Remember also that it is your name which she bears; you imperil your honour by jeopardising hers. I write this unknown to the poor child, who now weeps as she with needle and cotton sews together the few pieces of mourning she can collect to do reverence to your dead son. Mademoiselle Biron, though young, is capable of engaging herself in instruction; she is of fine education. I myself, in the days of her father's prosperity, taught her the language of France, and she speaks and writes the English as well as me. Dear sir, to

exhort you to do your duty would be an insult; but I ask you to come to the relief of this poor child without delay.

'I subscribe myself with profound emotion yours respectfully,

'ANTOINE DE GAILLEFONTAINE.'

Mr. Fox walked up and down the room for a time; then he wrote:

'Dear Sir,—I am instructed by Mr. Gregory Biron to inform you, in answer to your letter, that Mademoiselle René Biron has no claim whatever upon his generosity. Mr. Gregory Biron disinherited his son Roger, and has no desire to communicate in any way with his son's family or connections. To relieve the present necessities of the unfortunate young lady he encloses bank-notes to the value of fifty pounds, and hopes it will enable her to obtain the en-

gagement for which you consider her qualified. At the same time he begs you to understand thoroughly that this closes the correspondence. I am instructed to destroy all communications for him bearing your signature or that of Mademoiselle René Biron.

'I am very obediently yours,

'Silas Fox.'

Mr. Fox had no sooner posted this letter than he regretted the course he had adopted. It would have been better not to have sent the money. René Biron might be an innocent girl, probably she was; but what of M. de Gaillefontaine? Would he take Miss Biron's affairs in hand unless he felt that he was better able to manage them?

This letter filled Mr. Fox with apprehension, which he could by no means dispel. There was a curious parallel in the

fact that these two men had educated the two grandchildren of Gregory Biron; the parallel might be still further extended. Mr. Fox felt that if this man were like himself he would not let the matter drop now that he had succeeded in obtaining fifty pounds; and he reflected with chagrin that the sum of money he had sent would enable the French adventurers to come to England in the prosecution of their interests. He was suspicious of every letter bearing a superscription not absolutely familiar to him. Every knock brought him to the door. He gave instructions to the lodge-keeper to send up to the house for him in case of any visitor presenting himself at the gate who had the appearance of a Frenchman, and by no means to suffer such an individual to pass the gate until he was sanctioned to do so by him.

At the end of a week Mr. Fox was sum-

moned to the lodge. A foreigner wanted to see Mr. Gregory Biron.

Mr. Fox hastened to the gate, but his worst fears were confirmed before he spoke a word to the visitors. A lady accompanied the gentleman. She was tall and slight, clad in black, and her face concealed by a veil. The man was unmistakably continental. He was small and dapper, but his manner and bearing were suggestive of a large man. He stood in the conventional attitude of the first Napoleon, his arms crossed upon his swelling chest; his back was curved like a dragoon's. His complexion was dark, his features of a Jewish cast—the nose somewhat hooked—eyes deep-set and black, twinkling with a mixture of good nature and shrewdness; cheeks shaven and blue and fat; jaw full; mouth adorned with a cosmetiqued moustache. The conscious superiority in his face and

bearing was extended to the clothes he wore. It was as if he had made his own clothes or been made for them, so admirably were the fine points of his figure displayed. And where Nature was not seen, art appeared. The lines of his trousers, the skirt of his frock-coat, were models for a tailor. His flowing hair met the deep full collar of fur upon his coat; cuffs of fur set off the pale glove upon his fat little hand. In age he appeared to be under rather than over forty.

Mr. Fox coughed, smiled, smoothed his hands, and inclined his head. The visitor turned and raised his hat. The expression of the two was entirely different. Mr. Fox was humble and uneasy; the visitor was dignified and composed. Mr. Fox appeared to be lowering himself to the level of an unknown stranger; the visitor looked as if he recognised the dignity of his own posi-

tion, and was willing to accede equality to one of whom he knew nothing ill. He presented his card.

'Monsieur de Gaillefontaine,' read Mr. Fox. 'May I ask what business has brought you here?'

'No business has brought me here; it is gratitude truly.'

'And you wish to express your gratitude to Mr. Biron?'

'It is true. But you will tell me he is not at home; is it not so?'

'If Mr. Biron were at home the result would be the same: he would decline to see you. My name is Fox—'

'Ah, Mr. Silas Fox! Allow me to give you the hand.' He took it and pressed it warmly, before Mr. Fox could evade the touch. 'I am indebted to you for your polite reply to my letter.'

'In that reply I endeavoured to express

Mr. Biron's distinct wish to have no further communications with Miss Biron or her friends.'

'It is true; and you expressed that desire in admirable English—quite grammatique.'

'Mr. Biron has not changed those views.'

'Mister, it would be unjust to suppose that so estimable a man could change his views.'

'Then I fail to see what, knowing that, you purpose by this visit.'

M. Antoine de Gaillefontaine drew himself up an inch or so, and said, with dramatic emphasis,

'You forget, for the moment, that the blood of France runs through Miss Biron's heart, and she would express the gratitude she feels.'

'I will tell Mr. Biron of the young lady's esteem, and that will be quite sufficient.'

Mr. Fox smiled, and so did M. de Gaillefontaine, but differently, and he said,

'Indeed it is not so. Miss Biron could write words. She has written words—sweet, gentle, pathetic; but how did they avail?' Mr. Fox blinked under the penetrating inquisition of M. de Gaillefontaine's black eyes. 'How did they avail? Ma foi, not at all! I could write thanks—grammatique, poetic, sublime. But could they convey one hundred parts of the emotion that shall dwell in Miss Biron's beauteous eyes when they rest upon her grandfather? Oh, no, mister. On this matter you and I differ quite much. But why do I converse? I occupy your valuable time, for which I offer one thousand apologies. Mr. Biron is not at home. That is sufficient, for the present. He will not for ever be not at home. I shall call again—to-night, to-morrow, the next day, the day after,

next week, in a month, a year, half an hour. Nay, we may meet him coming home. We shall be neighbours, Mr. Slias Fox. I have taken a room at your charming public-house, with my good friend Mr. Blake and his agreeable daughter. As I say, we may at any moment meet Mr. Biron *coming home.* Then shall his granddaughter tell him how grateful she is for the money that has enabled her to come to England. I have the honour to wish you farewell until we have the happiness to meet again. My child, come, our little private talk is over, and we will take a walk around the outside of this charming park.'

He turned to the young lady, who had withdrawn from him a few yards at the approach of Mr. Fox, and was now caressing a kitten with her small neatly-gloved hand.

'Ah, ma petite mignonne!' cried M. de

Gaillefontaine, in a falsetto key, lifting the kitten to his face; and added, turning once more to Mr. Fox, 'I am fond of all the animals, mister. I like to examine their nature and to understand them. Farewell, little cat; we shall see you again.'

Mr. Fox ceased to smile as he walked beneath the trees, his hands behind him, his head bent in thought. He was afraid to believe his own opinion upon the character of M. de Gaillefontaine. He would have liked to believe him eccentric, enthusiastic, and simple; but he could not. At the best of times it is difficult for some men to think others better than themselves.

The uncertainty and apprehension he suffered were unequalled by any previous discomfort. He experienced the feelings of a coward put into a dark room with one probably a foe, and armed.

M. de Gaillefontaine enjoyed the senti-

ment of hope encouraged by a successful beginning. He knew his own strength, and was satisfied with the appearance of the man he had to deal with.

'And what do you think of our estimable Mr. Fox?' he asked of René Biron, as they walked from the gates.

'I do not like him. Oh, no; he is a leech.'

'A leech, a leech! What do you call a leech?'

'A creature like a slug—like a snail without his shell—a slimy, soft, crawling thing—ugh! Only the leech it fastens upon the legs of children who step into the mud where it lives, and sucks their blood.'

'I know what you mean. But Mr. Fox, he will not suck blood; he is quite harmless. He is only a slog.'

'I do not like slugs.'

'It is wrong to dislike them. The good

God sends all these creatures for a wise purpose. This Mr. Fox shall perhaps be the means by which one day all this magnificent place shall become yours. Behold the grand house, mademoiselle—ugly, but an admirable protection against the fogs and mists of the country; see the road leading to it—straight, but easy for the wheels of a carriage. The grounds, you will notice, are superb; the trees, how magnificent! the flowers, how divine! the river that you see below, between the boughs of the wide-spreading oaks, what repose! But stay, Miss Biron—see, more! Look with the eyes of your imagination, and behold what our hopes suggest. Surround that square blank house with a crystal verandah festooned with jasmine and clematis; smother the walls with roses and passion-flowers, that cluster over the large windows, and depend in luxuriant masses

from the balconies. The windows open like ours in France, and delicate silk curtains float in the summer air. It is a fairy palace; and see—it is a fête-day. There is a striped pavilion upon that extended lawn, where neat maids dispense cool wine and luscious fruits and bouquets to the guests. There are luxurious couches in the agreeable shade. Along the wide road beneath the arching avenue roll stately equipages, filled with the nobility of the country. Cavaliers and ladies canter over the turf; a gilded barge floats upon the silver Thames, and the swans feed from the dimpled hands of infants. In the *salon* reclines a lady —young, beautiful, elegant—surrounded by worshipping genius. Musicians, painters, actors, sculptors, poets, artists of every kind, are her guests, and she is their friend —René Biron!'

René had French blood in her veins;

she was imaginative; she was but fifteen; and the French, highly-coloured, and dramatic picture drawn for her by M. de Gaillefontaine appealed at once to her ambition, vanity, and imagination. M. de Gaillefontaine stepped aside a pace to note the effect of his words. René stood for two minutes motionless, looking over the lawn and flower-beds before her in silent reverie. Then, with a little blushing laugh, she turned, and slipped her hand under the arm of M. de Gaillefontaine.

CHAPTER VI.

After dinner M. de Gaillefontaine sat a while with René beside the open window which looked on to the river, and chatted pleasantly of men he had known and things he had seen and places he had visited. He had married young and lost his wife, and to dispel his sorrow had travelled wherever his adventurous spirit inclined him. He knew four or five languages and was a master of fence, and upon teaching he relied for support whenever there was no easier or more remunerative employment to be had. He had taught German in Russia, and Italian in England. He had fought under Garibaldi; he was in Paris during the siege, and came out of the city

at night in a balloon. He had written articles for newspapers, invented machines, and been engaged in a dozen ineffectual schemes to obtain a permanent income without working for it. When he had money he spent it freely and boldly, never troubling himself about consequences and the affairs of to-morrow. It was interesting to him, and not at all dispiriting, to find his possessions reduced to a few small coins. 'Now we shall see what Fortune has in store for us this time,' he would say gaily.

A man with his experiences and his light temperament is always amusing as a companion, fascinating even to those whose natures are more sober, whose actions are based upon firmer principles. What the principles were which governed M. de Gaillefontaine's conduct of life he told René, and would tell any one else unre-

servedly. 'I recognise my duty to myself and to my fellow-man. My first duty is to take care of this body which Providence has given to my soul to live in. I feed it, I clothe it, I keep it warm in the winter, and cool in the summer. I economise its powers, that it shall last me long and be pleasant to dwell in always. To do so I give it what exercise is necessary and agreeable, and avoid putting it to the daily drudgery which, my God, will destroy the body of a horse-cart. And my duty to my fellow-men is to love my friend, to help him, to give him half of that I have, to risk my life for his, to love him truly, and hate his enemies as he hates mine. As for my enemy—ah, my duty to myself requires of me that I put that enemy out of my way. If he is an ignorant brute, I move him away gently; if he is an obstinate beast, I kick him; if he is a serpent, I put my heel

upon his head and crush his life out. It is true!'

When the air blew cool and the stars began to twinkle, M. de Gaillefontaine bade René adieu, and strolled out upon the green with a cigar in his mouth, and one hand in his swelling bosom.

René still sat by the window, her hands folded in her lap, her mind occupied with meditation.

Her present position was but of slight consideration to her; for she was by nature fearless and bold, and as fond of adventure as M. de Gaillefontaine himself, to whom this spirit had endeared her. She was prepared to accept all that he had predicted for her, and she was ready if his hopes were frustrated to obtain a living by teaching or whatever occupation she could get. If any one whom she respected had said to her now, 'It is better to eat bread

and salt and earn it, than to feast in idleness, leaving your noblest faculties undeveloped,' she would have dissolved partnership at once with M. de Gaillefontaine. She knew nothing of the duties and responsibilities of life; in nice points her sense of right and wrong had never been appealed to. How should it be otherwise, poor child?

From her infancy she had known only her father, her tutor, the servants, and the most madcap of the village girls. Her father indulged her to excess, only chided her when some particular act of daring jeopardised her safety or took her too long from his side. Her tutor, M. de Gaillefontaine, loved himself too much or too greatly admired the girl's daring to rebuke her or mention one word to her father of the bold things she did, and the manner in which she set his authority at defiance; and for

the rest they loved her too well to look upon her faults unkindly. Thus she was spoilt, if one may say so of her who knew no evil thought, who was free from malice, who was inflexible in executing a purpose which she believed right, who would step from the primrose path into the thorny way if a loving finger pointed, whose very heart was weeping now for the dead father.

In the season of distress it is not hard whilst daylight lasts, and there is movement and life around us, to make the heart obedient to the will. We answer when we are spoken to, we smile, nay, we can even laugh a little; we eat, and if we are left alone, we follow with our eyes the words upon a printed page, and gather from them some vague idea of their sense; we can for a few moments forget altogether that we have hearts at all. But when the night falls the will demands rest, and unrestrained

the tears well up from the bursting heart, and sobs shake the feeble body. The stillness speaks of the busy hands folded now for ever. The very silence tells us of our loss, and recalls to memory the voice that is hushed to be heard again no more. The tender winds sigh, the stars twinkle like tear-laden eyes of heaven, and their sympathy moves us to weep. Imagination sleeps; only memory remains awake to us.

First one tear coursed down René's cheek as she remembered a quaint word of parting her father had used at night; and then she thought of his morning smile, the series of little straining hugs with which he had greeted her return to him. She recalled the little lectures he had given her after her escapades. Ah, how readily she had forgotten them then! how they clung to her now! The tears dropped from her cheek upon her hands as they lay in her lap. She

laid her arm along the window-sill and her cheek upon her arm, and her eyes rested upon the faint outline of the distant trees against the pale sky—she thinking the while of the row of tall poplars near the old home, where at this time often she had listened to the tinkling bells hung around the necks of the horses, as her father drove up returning from market. 'He used to call "René!" loudly long before I could see him,' she thought, and checked her sobs as if thinking she might once again hear the deep soft voice; and then she gave way to passionate tears, and her heart throbbed and heaved as though it strove to break.

CHAPTER VII.

M. DE GAILLEFONTAINE strolled leisurely to the lodge of Riverford, and inquired if Mr. Biron was yet returned. The lodge-keeper said 'No' emphatically. The French gentleman was not astonished; doubtless the esquire would not return for some days; but his granddaughter must weep until she laid her head upon his bosom, and it was for her satisfaction he encouraged himself to trouble monsieur the lodge-keeper at that late hour. 'No trouble,' said the man. Ah, it was very good of him to interest himself in the beautiful unhappy young lady. Perhaps he would be so good as to lay these cards on Mr. Gregory Biron's table. 'I'll send 'em up,' the man said.

M. de Gaillefontaine offered him one thousand thanks, and left his own card with that of Miss René Biron for the lodge-keeper and his wife to speculate over.

Then he returned to the Ferry-boat, and took a seat in the parlour, where harmony prevailed, and asked for a long pipe and porter-beer. He joined in the choruses, applauded, sang a song when called upon, and conversed with every one without reservation, telling candidly that he was but a poor friend of the beautiful Miss René Biron, and should have the happiness to stay amongst them only until the return of Mr. Gregory Biron to his home.

'Well, he's at home now, if the Jack aren't got him,' said Sir Linton Clinker's George; 'I see him this afternoon angling down by the two-willer eyot.'

'You must be mistaken!' cried M. de Gaillefontaine.

'Beg pardon, sir, I'm not. I see him and Tom Reynolds in the new punt, and I'll lay a guinea you'll find 'em there to-morrow, so be this weather holds on.'

'Then truly Mr. Fox he was mistaken when he told me.'

'Not at all unlikely, my way of thinking. *He* don't want to see any of the old man's kin theare. What did I tell yeu, Blake, long ago? I says in this very parlour when we was talking affëars over, I says, that Fox means to have old Biron's money, and he'll get every one out of hes way 'fore he'll let 'em have a sheare of it—didn't I?'

'Well, Garge,' said the diplomatic host, ''tain't no business of mine, and 'tain't no business of yeurn. I ain't 'tickler fond of old Biron, and he ain't 'tickler fond of me.'

'Nor no'ne else,' said George the contentious.

'Some people never see a mad dog aeout flingin' stones at him. My part, I keep aeout hes way, case he turns raound and bites me. Naow, Garge, I call 'pon yeou for a song.'

Later in the evening Tom Reynolds joined the company, for it was now two long months since Hugh had bidden Mattie a fond farewell, and the young lady once more smiled upon the gardener.

She had vowed, with tears and kisses to witness, that she would be constant to Hugh, and would suffer enduring sorrow until he came to lead her to the altar, in that last interview before Hugh's departure; but the latter article of her treaty was so fiendishly unnatural to one of her quick and healthy nature that it was repudiated in a fortnight. Constant she was still. She listened to no tale of love—perhaps because Tom Reynolds had not sufficiently recovered from his mor-

tification to tell it—and she blushed when Tom's eyes spoke of that second crop of love that was springing up in his bosom. Sturdier and stronger was that love than the moist green first love of his.

Mattie occasionally screwed out a tear over the faded flowers Hugh had given her; but she smiled every day over the fresh buds that Tom brought her. Is it not pleasanter, as a daily occupation, to smile than to weep? And so it was that Tom Reynolds once more shook the rafters with his patriotic lungs.

M. de Gaillefontaine, with commendable good taste, refrained from further allusion to his affairs after the protest from Mr. Blake; but he addressed himself to Tom Reynolds, and became deeply interested in floriculture. He begged him to drink porter-beer, and offered a cigar from a most marvellously ornamented cigar-case that

would have rendered the rankest cigar a luxury. Tom was proud to be so honoured in the presence of Miss Blake, and on his road home he asked his companions for particulars respecting the foreign gentleman, and learned what every one in the village, he excepted, knew or suspected. At the lodge-gate he stood and talked a while, hearing there further items of news respecting M. de Gaillefontaine and Miss René. He was shown the cards which had been left that very evening, and was warned to say nothing about them, as Mr. Fox had ordered that all cards and letters were to be given to him personally.

The next day, as Gregory Biron sat beside Tom Reynolds in a punt moored by the willows of an eyot, his temper was ruffled by the approach of a boat.

'Hang the thing, I might have had a bite but for this infernal disturbance.'

Tom Reynolds was used to the passing of boats and the petulance of Gregory; but he cast a look of curiosity to see who passed. It was a large dingy, and in the back seat sat a gentleman with fur round his collar beside a young lady in black. A magnificent rug was spread over the back of the seat. They had a man to pull them, and were admiring the beauty of the river. The gentleman recognised Tom Reynolds with an affable nod, and Tom grinned response.

'Who the devil is that?'

'Gentleman I met at the Ferry-boat last night, sir.'

'That's no answer. I say, who is he?'

'A Frenchman, sir; his name is Gaily-fountain, as I read it.'

'Oh, you read it! Where did you read it?'

Tom was silent.

'I say, where did you read it?' shouted Gregory.

'On a card, sir, at the lodge.'

'Oh, he left his card for you, did he?'

'No, sir, he left it for yeu.'

'Well, hang me if I ever heard anything better in all my life! My servants know my visitors and read their cards before I know their names. Perhaps you can tell me who the young lady is?'

Tom was again silent.

'I say—pr'aps you can tell me who the young lady is!' exclaimed Gregory, glaring like a maniac.

'Well, I never told yeu a lie, sir, and I deu kneow, and I doan't like to tell you.'

'Why?'

'It will make you angry, maybe.'

'Curse me, Mr. Reynolds, you will tell me presently that I can't control my temper; perhaps you will say I am irritable,

hey? Well, then, now who is that young lady?'

Tom said doggedly, 'Her name is René Biron, and she is your granddaughter.'

Gregory sprang from his chair, flung his rod in the water, and looked as though he would like to pitch Tom Reynolds after it; then he said,

'And pray who told you this?'

'A lot of people.'

'Oh, it is the talk of the village?'

'Yes.'

'Well—go on, stupid head, talk! What the devil are you waiting for? Talk! Why haven't I seen them? why weren't their cards sent up to me?'

'You must ask Master Fox. We are under his orders.'

'That I will. Home! and look alive about it.'

When M. de Gaillefontaine and Miss Biron called at the lodge in the afternoon, they were at once directed to walk up to the house.

M. de Gaillefontaine hummed a little tune of his own improvising as he thought over the task before him. He had heard sufficient to form a pretty accurate idea of the kind of man he was about to cope with, and he apprehended less from him than from René in the approaching interview. Had René been cunning or simple he would have feared nothing.

He ceased humming, cleared his throat, and said,

'In all likelihood we shall now at last see your grandpapa, Miss Biron. May I, so unworthy, so humble, presume to offer a suggestion?'

'I have none but you to guide me now,' said René.

'This wide world is so cruel, so cold, so selfish, it is hard even for men with courage and strength and experience to live without enduring hardships and slights and cruelty. I would have you believe me. It is true.'

'Ah, me! I know so much.'

'You will think deeply how miserable it is to drudge for bread like the poor girls in that dress-factory at Gomarche, mademoiselle, where infants no older, no stronger than yourself worked until their faces were white, until their fingers bled, until all the smile left their faces. You will think of this?'

'Yes.'

'Once in one thousand years it comes to a poor helpless child to make a fortune in half an hour. You will think that you are a helpless child, for, my faith, I find this morning I have only half a pound left in my pockets. We have found that this

grandpapa, this esquire, this great Mr. Gregory Biron is not without love. He cherished for nineteen years the son of your father's brother, and that brother was no less disobedient than your father. He loved that Mr. Hughes.'

'And then hated him, and turned him from his doors without one penny.'

'Yes, and why?' asked M. de Gaillefontaine eagerly; 'because Mr. Hughes was what you call saucy.'

'He was independent.'

'Yes, it is true. He could sell pictures. But he was not saucy until he could sell pictures. May I suggest, mademoiselle, that until you can be independent, you shall not be saucy? We can see that this gentleman is proud of his finest house, of his finest garden, of his longest and straightest road, this which we walk on. He will likewise be vain to point to the most beau-

tiful young woman in the world, and say, "This is my finest granddaughter."'

René nodded assent. She knew she was beautiful. Girls learn that before they are sixteen. M. de Gaillefontaine continued:

'But you will remember that this man is old, he is a widower, an eccentric. He will say disagreeable things, he will not at all be what you expect, and you will not be saucy to him, because he is old and cannot understand what he says; and you will be warm to him, because he is cold to you —that is your holy duty. And you will not contradict the things I may say. Remember it is an insult to Providence if you do not assist yourself to the gift she offers.'

René did not answer. The advice seemed to be unnecessary. It was impossible that she could take offence at any-

thing the father of her father said. She had in her possession a handkerchief and a watch-ribbon that had belonged to Roger Biron—they were the only souvenirs she could retain—and if those mute relics were dear to her, how much more would she love one in whose voice or manner there must be something to remind her of her father! She yearned for something to love, for some one on whom to expend the affection that generated in her young heart. She looked forward to meeting Gregory Biron with feelings far different from those of M. de Gaillefontaine.

When the door opened, and the thin white-haired old man entered the drawing-room into which the visitors had been ushered, she rose instinctively and looked eagerly for some suggestion of her father, and then she quietly sank into her chair, dull, disappointed.

Gregory bowed coldly to the two and addressed himself to M. de Gaillefontaine, after bidding Mr. Fox, who had entered the room like a dragged hound, to go and stand in the light, where he might be seen.

'My name is Gregory Biron; that is Mr. Fox; your name is, I think, Gaillefontaine?'

'It is true, and I am your obedient servant.'

'I will ask you to explain the object of your visit and the circumstances which led to it as briefly as possible. Until this morning I was unaware of your existence.'

'Impossible!' cried M. de Gaillefontaine, in astonishment.

'You will do me the justice, if you please, to believe that I deal only with absolute truths. When I say that you are unknown to me, I state the fact and not an impossibility.'

M. de Gaillefontaine drew an elaborate case bound with mother-of-pearl from his bosom, and presented a couple of letters to Mr. Biron. He read them through, and turned to Mr. Fox.

'These are of your writing?'

Mr. Fox regretted to say they were the unhappy means by which he had endeavoured to spare his respected employer annoyance and—Gregory checked him.

'That will do, hold your tongue. This man, my secretary, intercepted your letters and answered them to further his own mercenary ends; and I suppose you have come from France with some such motive.'

M. de Gaillefontaine rose from his seat, thrust his hand in his bosom, and said,

'Sir, I am poor—'

'Of course you are, or you would not have troubled yourself to come here. Sit down.'

M. de Gaillefontaine did not sit down; he took his hat from the side-table, and said,

'I am poor, but I have the pride of a gentleman and a chevalier of France, and I have also the heart of a man. I have come from France seeking an engagement, and I have come here to bring your son's child to you. It has been my pleasure to have the company of so sweet a young miss; my recompense to know that I was protecting her from insult. And now, mister, I leave her to your care.'

'You are not going to leave the girl here?' said Gregory incredulously.

'Undoubtedly. You will do me the honour to believe of me that I also speak absolute truth.'

'Curse your impudence! Leave the girl here, whether I choose to say she shall stay or not?'

'It has been said of me by an eminent

English that I know the language of England better than many educated natives; but I must own I know little of your law. Yet I believe it is not for you to choose in this matter; you must support your helpless grandchild. And, ma foi, where shall I leave her if not here? In your streets, to get her living there? I thank my God I am too poor for such heartlessness.'

'Leave the room, Fox. What are you standing there for, with your long ears stuck out?' Gregory had not anticipated the turn things were taking. 'And now, Monsieur de Gaillefontaine, what do you propose doing?'

'I propose leaving you, mister, and you also, my poor little cabbage. But first I would have you regard the child, sir, to be assured she is your granddaughter by the likeness she bears your son.'

'I will not dispute the point, and I do not desire to see in any one a trace of my son. He was an ungrateful hound!'

René sprang to her feet and cried,

'He was nothing of the kind. He was the sweetest, kindest, dearest father that ever lived, that ever died, and I will not stay with you, I will earn my living.' She turned to Gaillefontaine. 'You told me that if this man would not help me you would. What can I do?'

M. de Gaillefontaine heaved a deep sigh and shook his head.

'I thought at one time,' said he mournfully, 'that you might obtain the engagement of a teacher at a school: it was rash; I did not then know how imperfectly you speak the English. No, you have only your wonderful beauty to recommend you. Mr. Blake—he is a good man, he will let you serve porter-beer perhaps; if not, I see

nothing for it but to let you accept the offer of my friend in Leicester Square, of the Alhambra. You must be a figurante.'

'What? a barmaid at a public-house, a ballet-girl at the Alhambra! Good heavens! a Biron, my grandchild! Surely you will not disgrace your family?'

'Mister, you think of yourself, not of this poor child. Why should not she think also of herself, and not of you? Does she owe you one farthing? No, thank God; it is to the kind Mr. Fox she is indebted fifty pounds.'

Gregory Biron started to his feet and began pacing the room, talking as he walked, disconnectedly, passionately. At length he said,

'You are too clever by half, Monsieur Gaillefontaine; I am not to be bullied and coerced into things. I made up my mind when I heard of this affair that I would

adopt the girl, if only to have some one to leave my money to; and if you had behaved submissively I should have proposed to do that which you now compel me to do with a bad grace. An English gentleman won't be thwarted. I thought we had given you that lesson at Waterloo. Undoubtedly I would have left the girl my money but for your excessive bounce, Mr. Frog. As it is, I shall take her, of course—'

'Why of course? It is not of course at all. This matter is not one of money now; it is one of affection. I will offer this poor one all you can and more; I will give her clothes and food and affection, though I am a stranger and a man; and she is beautiful —ah, so beautiful and young, and a woman; and the world is censorious, and may say wicked lies and damn scandal. I will work till my fingers are bone and my eyes are

blind, that she may have food and clothes and shelter. You can offer her no more. But this I will offer her, which you do not: I will offer a kind companion, a true friend, a honest heart, and the society of a gentleman who can speak the English decently. And it is for you, my poor little cat, to say whether you will accept this proud man's money or this poor Frenchman's brotherhood.'

'She can't live with you, man.'

'She *shall* live with me if she choose, and who shall say No? Mademoiselle, it is not of use to prolong this exciting scene. Tell me what you will do.'

René's eyes had filled with tears over the devotion of her small protector—she was taller than he—and now she turned to him without hesitation, and said,

'I will trust you, and I will work. I shall like the theatre.'

'Then, Mr. Biron, we will say to you farewell. We came to thank you, but find we must thank the good Mr. Slias Fox, and have nothing whatever to be grateful to you. Farewell.'

He made a stately bow, which Gregory was too absorbed in reflection to observe, and withdrew with René. But before they had reached the hall-door, Gregory, following, said in an altered tone—it was dogged and sullen,

'I will ask the favour of two words more with you.'

'A thousand, if they will benefit my sweet friend. But though I am strong, she is fatigued, and she is broken-hearted; for she came here hoping to find in you the shadow of her father, as her father was the shadow of herself.'

Gregory looked for the first time at the face of the girl who had wished to love him,

with a sensation which had for many years been alien. He must have seen something in the great soft eyes recalling memories, mayhap two generations old, for he said quite softly,

'Did you hope to find me a lovable old man?'

The electric chain of sympathy was connected; that kinder voice had the deep mellowness of her father's. Instantly the tears flooded René's eyes, and she caught his white thin hand to her lips.

'Here, Harriet,' cried Gregory, 'take this young lady into the drawing-room. Is there a fire there? Right. Sherry and biscuits: and dinner will not be ready for an hour, my—my dear.'

René pressed the hand and followed the maid willingly, whilst M. de Gaillefontaine, vainly striving to conceal his tears seem-

ingly, followed Mr. Biron into the room he had recently left.

The two gentlemen were closeted for some time, and then went away together over the house, with the recalled secretary at their heels.

'Now do you think these three rooms will do for Miss Biron?' asked Gregory.

'If I might be allowed to speak for the young lady, I would of a truth say Yes, admirably.'

'Do you hear, Mr. Fox? These three rooms are in future to be devoted to the use of Miss René Biron, my granddaughter. You had better beg Miss Biron to inform you after dinner in what manner she will have them furnished. Where are your rooms?'

Mr. Fox led the way to his apartments. Gregory Biron had never interested himself in the house, and knew nothing of the

internal arrangements beyond the rooms he used.

'Upon my soul you know how to take care of yourself, Mr. Fox. Well, M. de Gaillefontaine, are these rooms good enough for you?'

'Superb! magnificent!'

'Very well. They are yours from this moment. Fox, clear out your private rubbish at once. These apartments are in future M. de Gaillefontaine's, and you will obey him as you would me. You understand? Speak up, fool!'

'I understand you, Mr. Biron.'

Gregory turned to M. de Gaillefontaine.

'Now that is settled you had best send down to the village for your luggage, and inform Miss Biron of the arrangement you have made. By the way, she will not object now, I suppose?'

'Now that you have bestowed a kind regard upon her she will never, never leave you,' said M. de Gaillefontaine, with a thorough belief in the truth of his own words.

He told René that her grandfather was softened, was great, was good, was magnificent and princely in his goodness, as he had been kingly in his wrath. She was to have a suite of rooms for her especial use, and was to furnish them according to her own taste; and he, M. de Gaillefontaine, was to dwell under the same roof, as her educational preceptor.

After dinner M. Antoine de Gaillefontaine walked out alone to enjoy his cigar and the evening breeze. He walked down to the lodge, and looked out into the road through the gates, with his arms folded in the Napoleonic manner. It was pleasant to look at the gates from the inside,

and he said, with a sigh of calm exultation,

'I have done it, it is true; but it was a tough jobs!'

CHAPTER VIII.

Before a month had passed, M. de Gaillefontaine saw one of his predictions verified. Gregory Biron was proud of the newly-acquired ornament to his house. To say that he loved René would be to abuse the sweetest verb there is. Swift transient flashes of a high emotion occasionally thrilled him, but his prevailing regard for her was no more than the satisfaction he felt in possessing a grandchild who bade fair to eclipse every beauty in the county, and reflect some of her lustre upon himself.

She availed herself without hesitation of the *carte blanche* given her, furnishing her rooms with the costliest things the upholsterer could suggest, and dressing herself

with consistent splendour. This boldness delighted Gregory. He took her to London, and bought her everything she asked for; and she asked for most of the things she admired. She sailed into the dining-room like a young queen, and Gregory set her at the head of the table. She demanded that M. de Gaillefontaine, as her friend and a chevalier, should have a seat at the table; and Gregory acceding to her wishes, the chevalier henceforth took his place at the board in becoming habiliments.

His coat was of the finest cloth, and had been returned to the tailor for reconstruction six times before the proper fall was expressed in the back. His shirt seemed to overflow with excessive purity; the cuffs ran down to his knuckles, the collar turned over and flowed outwards from his throat, his bosom swelled hemispherically from its margin of white tie and waistcoat. His

shoes were exquisite. He met Mr. Fox with a sigh, a shrug, a smile; and that gentleman, like a fallen angel, dined in solitude, and ate the cold mutton of remorse.

Feeling her power, René exercised it thoroughly and became a tyrant, and her grandfather a protesting yet yielding subject to her will; and had she been less exacting, Gregory would have treated her simply as a necessary evil; he would have shunned her, and granted her no more than she asked or he chose to concede. He would have been glad to know as little of her as possible, and used her and M. de Gaillefontaine no better than he used Mr. Fox. Human society is made up of despots and slaves, and it is questionable whether those who obey the one they admire are not happier than the one who commands those he despises.

Gregory was pleased to be ruled by the imperious René. He could see she was more beautiful than any creature he had ever seen, and he recognised the vigour and independent will of the fresh full-blooded young girl. She was yet maturing; every day brought her nearer to the standard of perfection.

Gregory fretted whenever she was from his sight. He scolded her for leaving him without his sanction, and she withdrew to her rooms and would not go near him for a week. After that, when she absented herself, he sat by the window watching for her return, with intervals spent in tormenting and worrying the unhappy Mr. Fox. Her waywardness delighted him. He had the eager devotion of a lover who has not entire possession of his mistress. He exulted in the tie which connected him with one so paramountly admirable; she altered

his existence, and made him happier than he had ever been before. When his fine old aristocratic ailments confined him to the drawing-room in the winter, he watched from the window his beautiful René learning horsemanship upon the wide sweeping lawn.

'She'll play the deuce with the men in a couple of years—before that, perhaps. I should like to hear old Clinker groan when his dowdy girls are all left in the cold. The women will hate her—he, he, he! Lord, what a devil there is in her! Look at her now—she'll break her neck! The Frenchman can't keep up with her. She will surely not take that fence yet awhile; she means it though, by George! I wouldn't have her injure her beauty for all the money in the world—she must not try it.'

He tapped at the window and cracked it, and called at the top of his voice, bid-

ding her not attempt too much. René turned her face, all sparkling with excitement and flushed with exercise, and nodded. She threw her hat aside, and her long black hair tumbled down upon her shoulder; she shook it back impatiently, gave the mare a slash over the neck, and went at a couple of hurdles brought upon the lawn at her desire. Gregory clenched his teeth and hands, M. de Gaillefontaine sat his horse like an emperor reviewing his choicest troops, and René went over the fence like a swallow.

'Bravo!' shrieked Gregory; 'bravo! well done! You're a queen of women, a Venus of beauties, my granddaughter René! Hang the gout!'

He was more impatient than she to go into society, but he restrained himself, like one who holds back in his hand the winning card until the proper time comes for play-

ing it to the general astonishment. Her seventeenth birthday was to be the occasion of a first state visit. On that day Gregory presented her with the finest landau that could be built, with the handsomest arms emblazoned on its panels which the heralds could paint. It was sent from Long Acre, swathed in cloths, and was brought to the door for her formal acceptance at breakfast-time the following morning. At the proper time the old gentleman took his seat by her side, and mantled with the richest of furs, they drove into society. There was no difficulty in renewing acquaintance with the families from whom the rancour of Gregory's disposition had long separated him. His name was without reproach in the ears of society, his wealth was undoubted, and every one was curious to see the probable heiress of his fortunes, of whom reports had already circulated. René was as

self-possessed as if she had been worshipped from her birth. She had the highest opinion of herself, and that is the best credential we can take anywhere, be we kings or dustmen. Gregory's utmost expectations were realised, and he was upon the pinnacle of happiness.

But René had Bohemian propensities, which she indulged to the peril of the position she held in society. She would by no means forget the man to whom she owed her fortune, and insisted upon his recognition by society, whether society liked him or not. To tell the truth, society was inclined to look on M. de Gaillefontaine with a doubting eye and a tip-tilted nose. Society knew no one of his name, questioned his right to the title of chevalier, and believed he had no money.

If she felt lazy she would dress herself without regard to the time of day or the

dictates of fashion, and lie in a hammock with a novel, and receive visitors there. The men liked her in this free-and-easy mood, the women were disgusted. 'I don't care a rap,' said René.

She started alone at seven o'clock one morning, rowed up to Oxford, and came home in her boating-dress by train at nine o'clock at night. She went into the woods nutting with Mattie Blake, and walked home with her to the inn-door, where at the time were lounging young Radcliffe Clinker, the Hon. Dowdy M'Pherson, and Fitz-Botherington Jones, son of the M.P. She had long chats with Tom Reynolds the gardener, and learned from him all that she knew about Hugh; and Tom, being only mortal and a lover, the knowledge he imparted was not greatly to his rival's advantage. René talked to him about Mattie; for if René had as yet no love of her own, she

was sufficiently quick to feel interest in the love-affairs of other people.

One day, as she was crossing with her horse and three members of the Loudon hunt in the same ferry-boat, and a dozen other gentlemen and ladies in full sight, two urchins in a boat, getting out of the way, ran into the weir and capsized. The gentlemen, then wearing their new red coats—it being the first meet of the season—called lustily to the man at the lock for help; but René, clutching the long skirt of her riding-habit up to her waist, threw herself into the water and struggled desperately towards the drowning children. She could swim no better than the children; and it was with much ado that the ferryman, with a boat-hook, managed to save them all.

After that she learned to swim. Calling her nymphs about her, she went morning after morning, as soon as it was light, to

the river, and, in full dress, plunged into the water from a punt and struck out for the shore, and tried, and tried, and tried again, until she could dispense entirely with the cord she had fastened about her for safety in the first attempts. She learned also to fence, and took her instruction from M. de Gaillefontaine, who, if his own modest reports were correct, was the most expert swordsman in the world. It was easy to foil her thrusts at first, but anon he had his skin broken and nearly lost the sight of his eye, and he found it necessary to protect his face with a basket as well as his pupil's.

She rode a horse like an Amazon, except that her style was more in conformity with the etiquette of civilisation, and nothing could debar her from attending a meet. She was never more audacious than when in the saddle; and this audacity led

to an incident which was not without bearing on this story of her life.

The private road that led into the highway from Riverford ran between Gregory Biron's estate on the one side, and that of Sir Linton Clinker on the other; but by crossing a paddock of Sir Linton's an angle was cut off, and this manœuvre Miss Biron invariably executed. The paddock faced the lodge-gate, and if that were held open René, with a short run, could put herself neatly over the paddock-fence. As she left the house one morning, she said to the gentlemen who had come to accompany her,

'I shall go over Sir Linton's field—will you follow?'

'May I ask why you choose that way?' asked some one.

'Because I like the leap, because it saves time, because the Clinkers are the natural

enemies of the Birons — Sir Linton has written, protesting against my using his field—and last of all, because I like it.'

But when the lodge-gates were opened a man was descried behind the opposite fence, holding his arms out like a semaphore. He would not move.

'Get out of the way!' cried René.

'I carn't. Sir Linton Clinker says I'm not to let yeou go over this field; it's privut pruperty,' answered Sir Linton's George.

'Tell your master that where René Biron wishes to go it will need some one better than his groom to stop her. Mind your head!'

George regarded his safety; but as the horse came down upon the sacred turf he ran up and caught hold of the bridle.

'Take your hand from the rein!' cried René, with a flash of wrath from her eyes, and raising her whip threateningly.

George was dutiful—stubborn.

'Master said if yeou came in I was to take yeou up to the heouse,' said he, and pulled at the rein.

'Drop my rein this instant!' said René, and cut at his hand.

'Shun't,' said George doggedly.

Slash fell the whip across his face, slash it went against her mare's neck, and the next minute René and her mare were free and over the further fence and into the road.

When at dinner-time M. de Gaillefontaine narrated this incident, Gregory Biron threw down his knife and fork, and cried,

'Come here, my René, my noble, brave girl; let me kiss you. Send Fox this very minute with a telegram to my solicitor, for I will not sleep until I have willed to you every penny of my money.'

CHAPTER IX.

René's spirited assertion of the right of woman to do what she pleases, even to the extent of committing trespass in the teeth of authority, met with general approval. The members of the hunt had expressed their entire approbation, and René knew that they would talk about it amongst themselves. Her grandfather's delight increased her elation.

It is impossible to be praised without feeling in the end that you fully deserve what you get. Indeed, not unfrequently we are apt to think the meed insufficient. Our love for another is not the only form of that passion for which an appetite grows by what it feeds on. When René had

heard all that Gregory and M. de Gaillefontaine and Mr. Fox—who never omitted to flatter her when there was opportunity—had to say in her favour, and for lack of words could say no more, she strolled through the shubbery and into the hothouse, where Tom Reynolds was at work. Reynolds took off his hat, and continued his work uncovered.

'May I cut you some buds, miss?' he asked.

'No, no. They are too pretty to cut.'

'Doan't deu the tree no harm, miss. It's like cropping a tarrier, it drives the strength in,' explained Tom, who was not more sentimental than other gardeners.

René laughed and chatted about flowers for a while, and listened to Reynolds, who talked about his management of them; then finding that conversation in this groove was

not likely to run on to herself, she changed the subject abruptly.

'By the bye,' said she, 'who is that tall red man of Sir Linton Clinker's?'

'You mean his coachman, miss; Gearge. Red whiskers—ugly-faced man.' (Tom was not ugly, nor were his whiskers red.)

'Yes; but his temper seems viler than his face.'

'We all has our tempers, miss. But Gearge has got more 'an a common sheare, he have, to *be* sure.'

'I gave him a good cut over the face to-day.'

'So I heered, miss,' said Reynolds quietly.

This was not flattery, so René continued,

'And I think he got as much as he deserved.'

Tom Reynolds cut away at his roses in silence.

'Don't you?'

''Taren't for me to say, miss.'

'Yes, it is, if I ask you.'

'I never say what I doan't mean, and I know my place, and I doan't waant to leuse it.'

René's curiosity was increased by his unwillingness to express his opinion, and not because she thought it was favourable to herself. Even gardeners know that their interests are not endangered by flattering. She questioned and protested and teased, until he was at length brought to speak.

'I doan't like Gearge,' he said; 'I've fit him twice, and I'd fight him again to-morrow, so be he gave me just cause. He's ugly, and he's bad tempered, and he's got red hair; but he didn't deserve to be cut over the face by you, miss; and I felt reglar down-hearted when I heard you had done it, miss. It warsn't a bit like you, miss. It

warsn't generous, and it warsn't fair, and it warsn't right, and it warsn't anything that could make me say to myself, "That's my young mistress all over." It aren't what I shall like to hear talked on at the Ferry-boat; an' Gearge he will talk of it, he will. Maybe I shall have to fight him to make him hold hes tongue. There, miss, it's a thing like bindweed, that doan't do no good to nubody, but twines up and spiles the flowers; and I'd just like to have it pulled up by the roots, and see no more on it never.'

'Then, pray, what would *you* do, Mr. Reynolds, if a great big *ugly* man caught hold of your rein?'

'Dussy I'd cut him over his feace same as yeou, miss, 'cause I ain't gentle by birth, and haven't had no better education than most of my class, 'cause Gearge he might try to hit me back agin. Gearge couldn't hit you, miss, and he must deu what hes

master told him teu, else he'd lose hes place and starve hes wife and family.

'Then what would you have had me do?'

'I'd a been preoud to have seen you suffer him to lead yeou up to the house, miss, that I would. It would have looked like you, miss. Yeou could 'a cut old Clinker over the face an' welcome.'

René left the house in a huff; she could not answer Tom Reynolds's arguments, and felt angry with him because he had made her angry with herself. She sulked within doors for an hour; then she started up, caught the first hat she could find, and sallied off to a house in the village where she had seen that red-haired foe occasionally nursing a child. George was gone to the Ferry-boat; but she said she would wait; and she sat down, and made herself agreeable to George's wife for two hours. At the end of that time the coachman ap-

peared, and then this young lady made him a handsome apology, and returned home alone at half-past ten o'clock.

Nevertheless she crossed the forbidden paddock the very next day.

Sir Linton added another hurdle to the fence, making it a wide leap; Miss Biron cleared it easily. He had it heightened with furze bushes; they tore Miss Biron's habit, otherwise she was unharmed.

The next day the furze was backed with a rail; that brought the mare down, and Miss Biron was picked up in a state of insensibility by Sir Linton's servants.

The injuries she received were sufficiently serious to restrict her to carriage exercise for a couple of months. Gregory was of course violently enraged, and cursed the infirmities which prevented him from pulling Sir Linton Clinker's nose. But a more powerful foe laid his hand upon

Gregory's ancient enemy, and death left the family feud to be sustained by Radcliffe, Sir Linton's sole surviving son. For that task Radcliffe was totally unfit, he being a young man of ordinary passions. He did not dislike Gregory Biron sufficiently to wish to injure him; and he admired René too much to injure himself in her estimation. He had been formal and distant in his behaviour when he met René, as the exigencies of the case demanded, but even with his father to encourage him in hostility he had fought faintly; now that his father lay dead he showed a desire to bury the family feud with him. Almost the first use he made of his newly-acquired power was to remove the barrier Sir Linton had erected, and to beg Miss Biron to make whatever use pleased her of any part of his estate.

Greatly to her grandfather's annoyance René accepted this treaty of peace, respond-

ing to Radcliffe's overtures with a frank avowal of her amicable inclinations, together with such generous smiles and lingering looks that he became the most fervent of her admirers; for René had many who loved her—that is to say, many who would have broken their necks to get her, but who could not have broken their hearts to lose her.

She knew her power to give pleasure, and she exercised it freely. Why should she not make men happy if a mere look or a smile could do it? It gave her no pain. The men were too old and she too young for matters to take serious proportions. Besides, there was safety in the multitude of her admirers. A mother need not fear for her son whilst he occupies but a twelfth place in a young lady's consideration. The primary stage of flirtation is at most times a harmless amusement, a game

like snapdragon, in which romping high-spirited young people pursue each other round a flickering flame, plucking out plums, but touching the kindled spirit too quickly to burn their fingers with it.

If René had centred her interest upon one of her numerous lovers, she and he might have been the happiest or most miserable of living creatures.

For a time she did devote most of her attention to Radcliffe, feeling well disposed towards him because of his good-will, and being desirous of annexing to her retinue the richest and handsomest young man of those parts; and for these reasons she kept him by her in the field, and admitted him to her society more than other men. But deeper than any other motive to be kind was a feeling of pity for one who had lost a father. Yet green in her memory was the recollection of the dear one she had lost.

When they were in a lane alone, and he spoke of his father, she checked her mare to a walking pace, and listened with downcast eyes to his sentiment. He saw a tear upon her cheek. To have lost that expression of her sympathy he would not have recalled his father from Hades.

The next time they were alone he tried again to elicit that evidence of her regard, and she, with quick womanly perception detecting the trick, cut him dead. He moped and was miserable under her displeasure, and she laughed at his dejection. That made him desperate and angry, and to pique her he kept out of her way until he could bear his voluntary banishment no longer, and came back to her with submission in his voice and eyes that implored forgiveness. She was cool to him until she found that he was actually suffering, when she became once more kind, though in a

modified way, treating him as she treated other men—no better, no worse.

This made him feel that he should like to marry her, and so have her all to himself. He took advantage of the first occasion of their being together alone, and said,

'I am thinking, Miss Biron, how kind you were to me during the first month of our acquaintance.'

'You behaved very prettily, and one must be kind to good boys.'

'I have offered you my estate; I have only one other possession to ask you to take, and if I beg you to have that, will it make you kind enough to accept me?'

'Is this an offer of marriage?' asked René gaily.

Radcliffe said 'Yes,' with an uneasy cough.

'You are a good boy. This is my first offer.'

'Then may I hope—'

'Of course you may; but you do not expect me to accept you now. The dowdiest girls refuse five or six men before they marry. I shall not be content until I have rejected a couple of dozen.'

'Is it not better to marry your first love?'

'I should think it would be better to marry the last.'

'Is there no romance in life? Is every girl calculating, cold, unsentimental?'

'I am romantic in a high degree; and I do not calculate more than most girls, Mr. Clinker.'

'Don't call me Clinker.'

'Well, Mr. Robinson. I am dreadfully sentimental. But would there be anything romantic about our marriage? We have known each other two months, and if we were to marry to-morrow we should have

nothing to congratulate ourselves upon. Now if you could make me another offer years hence, when our hair is streaked with gray—'

'Never!'

'That will do better still. You shall go away and break your heart, and when you are dying I will come to you, and a white-haired friar shall join our hands. Oh, that will be famous. You will go away and break your heart, just to oblige me, Mr.—Mr. Robinson.'

She laughed till the hill-side rang with her rippling voice, and broke away from her blushing crestfallen swain at a canter; and from that day she always addressed him as Mr. Robinson.

The passion a beautiful coquette inspires, with its few brief joys, its many lingering pangs, is about as undesirable a possession as the shirt of Nessus, which we

should thank our Dejanira to keep to herself. Far better is it to live uncovered than to be cursed with such clothing. For what is the heat of the midday sun or the chill of midnight winds to the fever heat and death cold of fluctuating love? The sun is hottest but for an hour, and the wind is forgotten when it has passed by; but the torments brought by that tunic of love are enduring, not to be forgotten until the poor wretch who wears it has dashed out his unhappy brains.

For all he suffered Radcliffe Clinker could not keep away from her who wrought his torment. He loved to talk of her; he was not displeased to be rallied by his friends for his love; and when they predicted that Miss Biron would presently succeed in catching him for her husband he declared openly that he had been rejected, but he did not descend to particulars.

Notwithstanding this declaration it became the talk of women that René Biron was setting her cap at Radcliffe Clinker; and their talk by some means reached the ears of Mr. Silas Fox.

CHAPTER X.

If one man may enjoy greater felicity than another, Hugh Biron at this time should have been he. He was untrammelled by domestic restrictions; his work was a pleasure to him, as all work should be; and his productions realised sufficient money to supply him with the necessities of existence and some modest luxuries besides. Charlie Brock shared a studio with him in the winter, and they worked together during the few hours of daylight: when the gloom of night and of much tobacco-smoke made them lay aside their palettes they adjourned to a social club of kindred spirits, and spent the remainder of the day in harmony and boyish fun. For boys will

be boys though they live to be a hundred, if care and disappointment and sorrow do not make men of them. In the summer the friends went forth with white umbrellas strapped to their easels, and small carpet-bags filled with equal proportions of tobacco and linen, and walked through Wales and the Lake districts, and settled amongst the Thames beech-woods when the leaves grew red. Hugh had done his duty, as he considered it, towards his grandfather by writing two letters to him. Neither was answered, so he dismissed the old gentleman from his memory as he did the pictures rejected by the last year's Academy exhibition. The cause of his disagreement also had ceased to occupy his thought. He had corresponded with Mattie Blake frequently during the first six months after leaving Riverford, and laid his poetical thoughts as offerings at her feet; but her responses

were disheartening. There was no poetry nor any grammar in her composition. He ran down to Riverford and saw her. It was a wet day, and they walked through the miry lanes under an umbrella. Miss Blake was too lively; he would not willingly have had her wretched, but her gaiety was the gaiety of indifference. He thought he detected a smile of recognition on her face when they passed the local policeman. She was not sentimental, and seemed but half sorry when he bade her good-bye. He returned to town and wrote her a cool letter, and in return received one still colder, in which Miss Blake said that there was an 'insumountable barraer' between them, and that in future Hugh must regard her only in the light of a friend. Hugh burnt her letter with a sigh which might have been of regret or relief, and a week after, coming upon a copy of some verses,

he wondered how he could have written such nonsense for a girl of her kind. And thus it was that, freed from all anxiety, and whistling for want of thought, he was settling himself down to work with a light heart one November morning when Mr. Silas Fox knocked at the studio-door.

'Come in,' cried Hugh. 'Be thou spirit of health or dealer damned, come in.'

'Eh, good-morning, sir. You don't remember me. My name is Fox, your old tutor.'

'So you are. Take a chair. You're welcome. It is not often that the old masters come to see us.'

'Still fond of a joke, Mr. Biron. Ah, three years make a difference, even in an old master: the lines multiply, he gets yellower, but let us hope not less valuable. *O tempora, O mores!* You have altered too, sir, but in such a manner as rather to assist

than retard recognition. I saw you last as a sketch, and since then imagination has represented to me the finished picture. I should have been astonished and disappointed to have found you still a sketch. This is the fulfilment of a vision which you may remember I set before you years ago. I think I may take to myself the credit of urging you to pursue the path that led to fame; may I be allowed now to congratulate you upon having obtained it?'

'I suppose a beggar may be congratulated if he gets halfpence and avoids kicks. So you may congratulate me and welcome, but not for my fame. How did you unearth me?'

'Struck by the beauty of an oil-painting in the Gray's-inn Road, I looked in the corner for a signature, and coupling the initials H.B. with the rare merit of the work—'

'Go slow.'

'I asked the lady of the shop—a stout lady—Mrs. Solomons by name, I believe, if she could give me your address. I wished so to see once more the man who as a youth held so firm a hold upon my esteem and regard. You will pardon my intrusion—'

'All right; glad to see you. I wish you would sit on that box and hold this maul-stick in your hand. I want to knock in an old man fishing to break up this foreground. You can talk all the same. There, sit a little more—so. Thank you. Now talk away. How is my grandfather?'

'Very ill, sir; very ill indeed. Confined to his bed these past two months.'

'Poor old fellow!'

'Still kind-hearted and generous as ever, Mr. Hugh. Yet you have little reason to commiserate Mr. Gregory Biron.'

'He was kind to me, Fox, until I was unkind to him. I often think that by

yielding to him I should have benefited myself.'

'In a pecuniary way, doubtless, sir.'

'Not only so. However, I have to thank him for my education; he has to thank me for nothing. I suppose he never speaks of me?'

'Never, sir, never. He forbids your name to be mentioned.'

'I wrote two letters to him; they were not answered. I expect he will never forgive me.'

Mr. Fox was clearing his throat to reply, when Hugh continued,

'I heard from—from Miss Blake that my cousin occupies my place.'

'Yes, sir; she and M. Antoine de Gaillefontaine have it all their own way with my dear old master. A very artful man, M. de Gaillefontaine; a very shrewd young lady, Miss René Biron. It is said

she is trying—that is, that Mr. Radcliffe Clinker proposes to marry her.'

'How does my grandfather like that?'

'He knows nothing of it, sir. I do not like to distress him in his illness. It would break the old gentleman's heart. M. de Gaillefontaine desires it to be kept secret. Very clever man, M. de Gaillefontaine.'

'Too clever, eh? You and he don't hit it?'

'We never quarrel, sir. But he does not like me. Miss René does not like me either. They know I have your interest at heart. M. de Gaillefontaine would have had me turned out of my place; but your grandfather, knowing my worth perhaps, or fearing that without a check of some kind M. de Gaillefontaine would overrule him in everything, will not part with me. Miss Biron dislikes me because she knows I respect you.'

'Sorry you should suffer on my account,' said Hugh.

'Ah, it is a pleasure to suffer for those we love,' said Mr. Fox, smiling upon the door, to which his face was turned.

Hugh could see the shining protuberance of the muscles under his cheek-bone from where he stood sketching the amiable angler. Mr. Fox continued,

'It is pleasant to see the realisation of one's fondest hopes, Mr. Biron; may I congratulate you upon your fame and independence? Nothing now will prevent your union with Miss Blake, I presume.'

'I possess independence, especially as regards Miss Blake and Fame. I made a slight mistake three years ago, Mr. Fox.'

'About Miss Blake? And you have discovered her real character, and brought the connection to an end? How wise! I found that I had made a mistake in the

estimation of that young lady's character. It shows how the best of us may be mistaken, sir.'

'Or the worst of us,' thought Hugh; and he shook his head at the sly old gentleman, his model, sitting there with his back bent, his knees up to his chin, the maulstick in his black kid-gloved hand, and the perpetual smile visible in the third of his face. 'However came I to be gulled by such a man? What a green young muff I must have been!'

Of course Hugh had no suspicion that he was green, or a muff, or liable to gulling now.

Mr. Fox continued,

'But you have made no mistake about that other young lady; Fame is yours, Mr. Hugh.'

'Not she. Pot-boilers are mine.'

'Pot-boilers?'

'Yes; trees and meadows and rivers and

skies; all the elements, with cows and crows thrown into the bargain, represented on one canvas for twenty or thirty shillings—that is a pot-boiler.'

'But surely, Mr. Biron, you have not lost ambition?'

'N-o—nor appetite neither. Nature is more imperious than Art. I must satisfy my vitals before I gratify my ambition.'

'You are so modest. Genius always is. Doubtless whilst you paint for money you work for Fame. Your pictures improve, they increase in value.'

Hugh assented hesitatingly. No one in his heart believes himself no better than he is; but facts compelled Hugh reluctantly to admit that he was no better than he should be. Solomons expected as much for his money now as he had got a year ago; and the price was more obstinately contested in each succeeding transaction. Solomons

was indifferent, Solomons was grudging of praise, Solomons insisted upon alterations. There was not one production of his three years' work which Hugh wished to set eyes on again.

'I suppose you spend a certain portion of the day in executing what I would term works of transcription—that is, landscapes from Nature or memory; and another to a work of creation—the embodiment of a grand conception—a poetical idea, a figure subject perhaps of an historical character. Such was your aspiration, I remember—the aspiration which led me to believe that you were fitter for an active than a passive life.'

Hugh worked away sullenly, and regarded the figure he was painting as the integral part of a detestable whole, whilst Mr. Fox continued,

'I suppose you have another studio, sir; I see no studies, no large canvases here.'

'This is my only shop,' said Hugh savagely, 'and I could not say that if my chum were here. Half is his, and half the things you see in it; the other half are mine, and I wish they were not, if only I had their value in my pocket. This thing on the easel is my best and worst and last work, and I hope to sell it to-morrow.'

'I am very, very sorry to hear you talk in this manner, Mr. Biron. It is so opposite my hopes and my expectations—so opposite all that could be desired and anticipated by one who gloried in your early promise, and in the vigour with which you undertook to fight the battle of life and win for yourself the wreaths of victory. To my loving eyes, sir, the fair young brow seemed in its very expansiveness destined for a noble chaplet.'

Hugh was silent; his hands rested, and his eyes looked through the murky window-

panes into the murky London fog beyond. That Mr. Fox saw, as he turned for a moment from his position.

'Surely, sir, you will not be content to live from hand to mouth in this miserable and inglorious manner. Whilst you have power to work you may be satisfied to merely earn the necessities for to-day; but supposing ill-health arrested the busy hand?'

'I have friends, thank God!'

'But could they afford to support you? and could you, Mr. Hugh Biron, afford to accept their charity? I hope most fervently not.'

'What shall I do?' asked Hugh doggedly.

'Take a nobler stand. He who goes upon all-fours must crawl. Oh, excuse me, sir; my enthusiasm makes me forget my position.'

'Go on, go on. I can listen, and thank you.'

'I would urge that if you would pace like the gods you must live erect. Stand like a god, move with the dignity of a god, and men will appreciate you, sir, worship you. Throw aside pot-boilers; take a grander view of a grand profession. *Do*, and make the public see that you do. Wake, sir! Your spirit is not dead; it only slumbers.'

Mr. Fox rose from his stool, and facing Hugh, spoke and looked as though he felt the thoughts he expressed. Perhaps he did; actors, night after night, have shed tears over the fable they represented. The unctuous smile left his face, his nostrils expanded, and his attitude would have excited the artistic admiration of M. de Gaillefontaine himself.

Hugh was impressed. He laid aside his

brushes, and, sticking his hands in his pockets, said,

'All this I have said to myself. You speak what I think; others have said the same thing.'

'Then why do you hesitate?'

'I am waiting for a yet wiser philosopher, Fox; one who shall tell me how to do this thing which all agree should be done. If a doctor orders a starving patient to drink port and eat beef, do you think he will hesitate to carry out the prescription if the food and wine are sent with it? How am I to pay for dresses, models, studio, canvas, colours—and bread, whilst I am working for Fame, and neglecting the only branch of the art which supplies me with the means of subsistence? No, Fox; if you want to do me a kindness, sit down there again, and let me plod on with my pot-boiler. I should have thought of this con-

tingency three years ago; now I have made my bed, and must lie in it.'

'If you intend to lie down all your life, sir, there is the greater reason for making your bed comfortable,' said Fox, relapsing into his smile, and smiting his gloved hand gently with the maul-stick as he spoke.

'What do you mean, Fox? Hang the simile!'

Mr. Fox smiled at the maul-stick, then he smiled at Hugh, then he smiled at the maul-stick again, but he did not answer.

'What on earth do you mean?' repeated Hugh.

Fox stood irresolute a moment; then he went to the door, looked into the passage, and coming back to Hugh's side quite close, said in a low voice,

'I think I told you that Mr. Gregory Biron is very ill. Yes. Well, the physician

told me in confidence that he could not live a week longer'

Hugh thought with pity of the old man; he had borne him no ill-will, and he thought now only of the gratitude he owed him. Some pleasant memories came to him of Riverford and the house that was now and for ever shut to him. Suddenly a thought flashed upon him, and turning to Fox, he said,

'Do your hints mean that my grandfather has relented towards me? Has he left me money?'

'Not one farthing. I have read his will.'

'Well, in what way does his death affect my position in art—my pecuniary interest, about which we were talking?'

'He has left every penny-piece to Miss René Biron. I shall have no more than you by that will.'

'Well?'

'Now supposing I could induce Mr. Gregory Biron to change his mind, and leave every penny-piece to you?'

'You do not suppose I would take it? My cousin has deserved his gratitude more than I.'

'You think so?'

'I left him; she has not.'

'She is too wise—too clever; so is M. de Gaillefontaine. He would not let René leave Mr. Biron, no, not for ten thousand a year.'

'How do you know?'

Mr. Fox coughed, and said quietly,

'He said so in reply to a little question I put to him.'

'Miss Biron at least deserves equally with myself. She has a claim as strong as mine.'

'You think so?'

'Is there reason that I should not?'

Mr. Fox nodded, and looking nervously at a door behind him, asked who was in the room beyond.

'No one,' said Hugh.

'It is well to feel safe when one is talking in confidence upon private affairs. Of course that room does not open upon the stairs?'

'No.'

'You do not know how M. de Gaillefontaine watches me. Mr. Hugh, that man and René Biron are—'

He put his lips to Hugh's ear, and whispered two or three words that caused the young man to utter an exclamation of mingled surprise and incredulity.

'It is true, and I can prove it,' said Fox softly but emphatically. 'And if I bring the proof to Mr. Gregory Biron he will revoke his former will, and leave the money

to you or to me or to some worse than useless institution. We run equal chances; but if I at the right moment worked upon his feelings, I could undoubtedly influence him in your favour. I could make the disposition of that property in your favour a certainty, if it were worth my while.'

'I do not understand you.'

'I will recapitulate. You and I and a public institution have equal chances of obtaining say a couple of hundred thousand pounds. We might consider that at the present moment we each possess sixty-six thousand six hundred pounds. Now if I insure your getting, not only your share, but the second and third shares besides, I lose for a certainty sixty-six thousand pounds, you see.'

'Yes.'

'But you would not expect me to lose my chance—'

'You want half of what I get through your aid.'

'I should be content with a third. I am not avaricious. I do this rather in the interest of justice and out of regard for my old pupil than on my own behalf, and yet I cannot afford to neglect my own interest entirely.'

Hugh had been looking idly at the picture before him as he listened to Mr. Fox, and he continued to look when Mr. Fox ceased speaking, his mind occupied with the strange problem before him. Would there be anything wrong in sanctioning a declaration of truth—of undeceiving a dying man—of accepting a fortune on the conditions suggested by Mr. Fox? He looked up from his picture at Mr. Fox bending over him. The thin cadaverous countenance, the unwholesome smile, the long bent figure covered to the finger-tips

in black, called to his imagination a strange parallel, and with this thought came the next, 'Get thee behind me, Satan.' He shook off doubt, rose to his feet, and said firmly,

'I will have nothing to do with this; tell the truth and welcome. If the money comes to me, well and good; I won't begrudge it, whoever gets it. And so let us take our chances.'

'I would prefer a certainty myself,' said Mr. Fox, fingering his shaven chin, and he added, 'even if I had to suppress the truth. No one suspects; no one has a single proof; no one could interfere if I were silent. M. de Gaillefontaine is not a fool. He will not lose two hundred thousand pounds when I produce my proofs. And yet I would far rather tell the truth than suppress it.'

He paused, eyeing Hugh sidewise. Hugh whistled and sat down.

'Mr. Hugh, have you any objection to my saying a few kind words respecting you to your grandfather?'

'No.'

'Would it not be pleasant to you to feel that he had gone from this world with the comfort of loving you in his heart rather than the bitterness of hating you?'

'Yes.'

'And if by a will dated, of course, after this interview of ours he left you all his property, would you consider me your enemy for saying those few truthful words of your affection?'

Hugh rose again, and went to the door, saying,

'This conversation is extremely unpleasant to me, and I will not add one word that shall influence your actions; and so good-morning. . . . Oh, no, I am not offended. . . . Yes, you may call again if

you please, but not to reopen this subject. Good-morning !'

Hugh shut the door, and returning to his easel moodily said,

'Why on earth did I not kick him out?'

CHAPTER XI.

You may see on a summer's day a butterfly hovering in the sunlight over a bed of bright flowers, its quickly pulsating wings presenting a morsel of radiant light, variously indistinct in form and colour like the flash of a prism; anon the sun is hidden by a cloud, the drooping flowers close their petals, the moth has ceased to flutter amongst them; but there upon a withering leaf it rests, its glorious wings expanded, its inner beauties displayed, its marvellous perfection revealed. In her mad coquetry René Biron was a butterfly, and appealed to the eye; and in her stillness she was yet a moth, but her beauty was seen by the soul.

When Gregory Biron, who may be compared to the withering leaf, took to his bed René postponed her engagements, and making an irruption upon her grandfather's chamber, turned out Mr. Fox, who was settling himself down to the performance of such duties of the nurse as consist mainly in making the patient miserable. Whilst she was by Gregory's side she mitigated his sufferings and *ennui* by those countless acts of consideration which are known chiefly by their absence: making quiet precautionary arrangements which precluded the necessity of the assertive remedy of an evil. She prevented inconvenience rather than cured it. Her works were unseen, and like the unobtrusive angel of health, whose constant ministrations to our happiness are unnoticed, she got no thanks for her kindness.

Nurses like Mr. Fox would have created

a draught, in order that they might close the doors and windows with zealous banging.

But René had two palpable advantages over Mr. Fox, which Gregory admitted—she was pleasant to hear and see. Her voice was tunable and sweet, and her conversation was lively, and she proportioned it to the patience of the invalid. He had no hesitation in telling her when to talk or be silent. If he desired quiet she sat where he could see her, and engaged herself in such light occupation as kept her countenance animated. She thought of herself only as subsidiary to his happiness. When she was not by his side she was still engaged in his behalf. She studied cookery from a big book, and then ventured into the unexplored culinary regions. She put on a print dress, went into the kitchen, borrowed an apron from the cook, and applied her

pretty hands and bright wits to the making of puddings, and to cooking the dishes that Gregory liked; and so well did she succeed that her grandfather remarked the difference.

'You have found a decent cook at last,' he said. 'Is he a Frenchman?'

'No; a young woman,' answered René slyly. 'She has lived some time in an English family; but her last place was in France.'

Gregory's disposition was not materially altered by illness; certainly he was not more amiable. He was conscious that he had not long to live, but by nature he was too self-willed and strong to feel remorse for the loveless life he endured or regret in quitting it. For many weeks he seemed unconscious of René's patient goodness; but at length it appeared as if his smouldering affection had struggled into feeble flame.

He got to love her sufficiently to be doubtful of her sincerity, as some lovers love their mistresses doubtingly, by reason of their own inconstancy and their inability to understand anything like disinterested devotion. He would endure no other nurse but her; he was exacting in his demands upon her attention, and took the utmost advantage of her gentle and yielding disposition. As he grew physically weaker his mental peculiarities strengthened and became prominent by contrast with the feebleness of his body. He could not lift his head, but swore at the servant who helped him; he reproached René for her tardiness and ingratitude when she hastened to him in the morning; he laughed to hear how she had received visitors in the kitchen, and then asked bitterly if she had not diverted them with a description of his ailments, and drunk his death for a toast.

He cursed his weakness; insisted upon René taking her dinner in his apartment; vowed he would destroy his will and cut her off with a shilling; and then, for the hundredth time, told her he would leave her every jot of his fortune.

The confinement and want of exercise told upon René's health, and one morning M. de Gaillefontaine came to Gregory with a shrug, a bow, and, indeed, two tears, to say that Miss Biron was unable to leave her bed.

'That means that she can wait for my death no longer, and has gone out to be flattered by a dozen fools no better than herself,' said Gregory sharply.

'Sir, regard this: it is your granddaughter of whom you speak.'

'Well?'

'Miss Biron sends for me, and she speaks: "Antoine, you will take yourself

to my dear grandpapa, and you will offer him a thousand apologies, and you will with your own hands construct for him a Charlotte Russe, and read to him the newspaper, and you—"'

'That will do. Leave the room, if you please; I will send when I want you. Desire my man Fox to come to me—that is, if he is not too ill to do his duty.'

'Sir, Mr. Fox he departed for London this morning.'

'Without my permission. Curse Mr. Fox! Send him to me the moment he returns, and ask the boots or the scullery-maid or the coachman, or any help that may happen to be at his post, to be good enough to come and wait upon me.'

He struggled to raise himself on his elbow as he spoke, and fell back with a peculiar noise in his throat that brought M. de Gaillefontaine quickly to his side.

'No; I am not dead yet,' growled Gregory, with a death-like cackle that served to express his pleasure in disappointing some one.

Later in the day the physician found him suffering from the effect of excitement, and ordered him to be kept quiet; violent emotion might at a moment check the feeble current of his life.

'And you,' he added to René, who received his instructions, 'must be careful. This change from a life of activity and the continued tension upon your nerves will bring you also under my care. If you wish to serve your grandpapa you must take exercise. Go for an hour's drive to-morrow morning.'

It was night when Mr. Fox returned from London. A lady of foreign appearance and accent accompanied him. They separated at the railway station, Mr. Fox

going to Riverford, the lady to the Ferry-boat, where a room was prepared for her.

Upon waking the following morning Gregory perceived Mr. Fox sitting by the window, his head buried in his hands.

'Where is René? where is Miss Biron?' asked the old man, collecting his thoughts.

Mr. Fox was startled, as if from a reverie, and he answered hurriedly,

'She—she has gone out for a drive.'

'Gone out for a drive, and I am lying here likely to die before she can return! Am I amongst fiends already? Where has she gone?'

'She has gone in her landau with M. de Gaillefontaine and Mr. Radcliffe Clinker.'

'What! Clinker? the man I forbade her to speak to?'

'It is said, sir, that they are engaged to be married.'

'You are a liar, Fox.'

'Sir, I have sinned against you too greatly to be able to deny any imputation you can put upon me.'

'Yes, I remember, you went to London yesterday without my permission.'

'I went to London to retrieve if possible a far greater offence that I had previously committed.'

'What do you mean? I have not long to live, and I don't choose to spend my last hours in finding answers for your riddles.'

'It is the precarious tenure of your life that leads me to speak now, as it was the prospect of losing one who has so long befriended me touched my guilty heart and filled me with remorse and contrition.'

Gregory beat his pillow impatiently, and Mr. Fox continued:

'If you can listen to my confession I will speak, if only to redeem the injury I have done.'

'Fewer words, fewer words.'

'When you disinherited your grandson, Mr. Hugh Biron, I hoped, sir, that you would leave your money to me, having no better friend; and you encouraged that hope.' Gregory smiled. 'Your grandson wrote you two letters, begging your forgiveness, and signifying his readiness to adopt the profession you had wisely chosen for him. Those letters I intercepted, for they militated against my interests.'

'You villain!'

'Pray do not excite yourself, my dear master. Miss Biron told me that the physician has warned her of the fatal results which might attend your agitation.'

'And she leaves me alone to the mercy of any accidental circumstance, and knowing that her absence must provoke my anger. And you rascal thief, what is your purpose in telling me of your villany? You

have no interest in my death; I have left you nothing.'

'I expect less than I deserve for myself; it is for your true and faithful grandson I lay myself open to receiving the malediction of one whose gratitude I should have earned. I went to London to seek your grandson, to bring him here, that he might receive your blessing and forgiveness; and I found, alas, that he has left England.'

'Where is he?'

'In India. He has taken up the weapon his father dropped in the Crimea, and like him, as a common soldier, is serving his Queen and his country.'

'Is this true?'

'Here are his letters.'

'Let them lie there. I will read them; I will make René read them: it will punish her for her neglect; and I will leave the boy half of my money. Send for the lawyer

to-night— But wait; what is your motive? You never did a thing yet but self-interest was at the bottom of it.'

'As I live, I am influenced alone by a feeling of remorse, and a desire to see justice done to the young man I have wronged and those who wrong you.'

'Who wrongs me?'

Mr. Fox was silent.

'Who wrongs me?' reiterated Gregory, with such fierceness as his weak condition permitted.

'If you were to hear the gossip that is in every one's mouth I should not have this unpleasant duty.'

'What gossip?'

'You would hear one ask why René Biron was so eager to engage herself to Radcliffe Clinker, the son of her grandfather's most bitter enemy; and you would hear another answer' — here Mr. Fox

dropped his voice, and spoke slowly—'you would hear another answer, It is because she wishes to make sure of his fortune, whilst at any moment a breath, a word, might destroy her own.'

'What do you mean?'

'Radcliffe Clinker is weak and young, René is beautiful and clever, De Gaillefontaine is the devil himself.'

Gregory beat the counterpane, and nipped it up between his thumb and finger. Mr. Fox poured out a dose of medicine, and putting it to Gregory's lips, said softly,

'For the sake of justice to your grandson, and to thwart the wicked ends of designing adventurers, drink this, and try to control your emotion.'

Gregory nodded his head firmly, and by an effort of will controlled his passion, and swallowed the draught. Then Mr. Fox said,

'You might hear a dozen people ask, Who is this M. de Gaillefontaine? who is this person who calls herself René Biron? and who is this Frenchwoman, who is continually hanging about the lodge-gates asking for M. de Gaillefontaine or Mademoiselle René?'

'What woman?'

There was a subdued cough from the farther end of the room. Gregory turned his head, and a lady seated in the distance rose and bowed.

'Who is she?'

'She is the mother of René.'

'Thérèse de Gaillefontaine, monsieur,' said the lady.

At a signal from Mr. Fox she reseated herself.

'I have brought her here,' said Mr. Fox, 'to confront her husband and daughter who deserted her. Let them deny her if they

can. And now, my beloved master, I wish you to look at this will, written as you see upon ordinary paper, which at a moment you may destroy if you find me a liar. See, I am not mentioned in it. You leave all to your grandson. I want you to sign this, and hold it in your hand when those two whom you have trusted shall stand before you, waiting for your verdict. You hold in your grasp their punishment or reward. Keep it under the bedclothes. If they are not what I say, give them the will and let them burn it; if they kill you, they defeat their own purpose.'

'Kill me!'

'Who has constantly administered your medicines, even cooked your food lately?'

'René.'

'And when she could not?'

'De Gaillefontaine. Hark! carriage-wheels! Give me a pen, a pen, pen! Sign

your name for a witness; get the woman to write hers. Quick, for God's sake! Hold me up! steady my arm! There, there, now write yours. Leave hold of me; I am strong now; I could walk a mile. I am well, I am well! You have brought my old fire back; see, I can sit up alone! Ha, ha! never mind about drying the paper. Give it to me — quick, I hear them coming up-stairs! So. Let me alone; I can sit firm. Hide the woman. Let her bounce out upon the cursed impostors. Hush, here they are! Pretend nothing has happened.'

Madame de Gaillefontaine slipped behind the bed-curtain. Mr. Fox placed a hand lovingly on Gregory's shoulder as he bolt upright sat in the bed, his hand clutching the paper beneath the clothes, the muscles of his face working involuntarily, and puckering his loose cheeks into ghastly

contortions. The door opened, and René, with M. de Gaillefontaine, stood in the entrance.

Gregory Biron strove to control his fierce excitement, that he might deliberately crush his foes. He fixed his eyes upon them, and the muscles of his face and mouth were in continual motion; but he uttered sounds without words. It seemed as though he had lost the power of giving direction to his will, or as though his will was solely occupied in maintaining existence. Beneath the bed-clothes he gripped the will; with his other hand he was perpetually pinching up the sheet. His actions were like those of a cat when it is preparing to spring upon its victim, and waits for the precise moment of advantage. This period of irresolution was terminated by a movement of M. de Gaillefontaine. The old man, like a child who is impatient of con-

cealment, abandoned at once the plan he had made, and swept his hand towards the curtains, nodding his head furiously at Madame de Gaillefontaine, and then at René and monsieur. At length he articulated,

'Who—who—who are they?'

Madame de Gaillefontaine emerged from concealment, and with a shriek of enthusiastic joy cried, 'My shile, my hosbant!' and threw herself upon the neck of M. de Gaillefontaine.

But above her voice there rose a gibbering laugh that rattled through the parched throat of the maddened old man, as he, with starting eyes and blackened face, dropped forwards—dead!

René had stood appalled by the frightful appearance of her grandfather; but now she rushed to the bedside with a swift ejaculation of horror.

Mr. Fox had his hand under the bed-clothes.

'He is dead,' he said; 'his hand is already cold.'

As he spoke he withdrew his hand and slipped a paper into his bosom.

CHAPTER XII.

René's nerves, weakened by the constant watching of past weeks, gave way under the shock occasioned by the frightful manner of her grandfather's death, and she was carried from the chamber insensible.

There remained in the room Mr. Fox and Monsieur and Madame de Gaillefontaine with the dead man.

The situation was dramatic in the extreme, and was admirably adapted to M. de Gaillefontaine's tastes and love of theatrical display. It was a scene in which he felt himself called upon to play a prominent part. He was embarrassed only as long as Madame de Gaillefontaine continued in his arms. By the time he had disengaged her

arms from his neck he had conceived a tolerably just idea of the position of affairs.

The lady was not his wife; her weight was sufficient to set aside any fear he may have entertained of truth in that direction. He never could have married a woman so gross. When he had drawn himself up and struck an attitude he said,

'And you, madame, do yourself the honour to call yourself my wife?'

'Antoine, am I not your Thérèse?' asked the lady in reply.

'I never contradict a lady. Come, madame; I will speak a word with you in private.'

Mr. Fox made a movement towards the woman in answer to a questioning look from her. M. de Gaillefontaine interposed.

'My good Fox, I forbid you to speak to my wife,' he said, and then led the lady

into his sitting-room and locked the door. Turning to her he said,

'Thérèse, that is a very fine diamond ring you wear upon your finger, and those earrings—they are superb. Your chain too is gold, and your watch probably. I see, too, that your bracelets are costly.'

Madame de Gaillefontaine smiled and inclined her head.

'But they are not fashionable, these trinkets. You will appear better without them, believe me. You will oblige me by taking them off, and giving them to me. At once.'

'They are mine.'

'You mistake, madame; they are mine. We are now in England, and you will understand that the property of the woman is the property of her husband. Give me therefore all your gold.'

Madame swore she would do nothing of

the kind; and to make her oath the more forcible, she swore in colloquial French.

'Thérèse, my wife,' said M. de Gaillefontaine, doubling his arm, 'regard! This is the muscles of my arm. I am strong; I have eaten bifteck to my breakfast many days. It is the custom of this country for husbands to beat their disobedient wives if they can. I can. Now I will give you half an hour to think whether you will obey me or be beaten. I will let you think out in the open air. If you will come to me in half an hour's time and say, "My husband, I will not give you the diamond ring, and the earrings, and the chain, and the bracelets which belong to you," I will give you a blow with my foot. Come, madame, allow me to conduct you to the air.'

He opened the door, and, taking his hat, led Madame de Gaillefontaine to the

lodge-gates, and there, raising his hat politely, he left her.

Recounting the particulars of this interview to René two days after, he said,

'Hélas, I shall not wonder if my wife never returns no more.'

'It is impossible that this was mere mistake,' said René.

'It is a silly mistake, mademoiselle; happily it is only a silly mistake. It was a mistake of this madame. Perhaps it was a mistake also of our Mr. Fox.'

'And my poor grandpapa died believing this lie!'

'He might have believed it had he lived; then probably this Mr. Fox would have been rewarded for his lie, and not punished.'

'I see the plot.'

'It is a very clumsy one. It is no marvel that these English steal their plays

from the French; for observe, this Mr. Fox would be original, and he constructs a stupid farce stupidly, and—pst! it breaks down in the first act!'

'He is a reptile.'

'No, no; he is only a slogs, a stupid slogs.'

'I do not like slugs.'

'Ah, good, mademoiselle. We will drop him out of this pretty garden to-morrow when it shall be yours. The solicitor, I shall communicate with him directly.'

René rose with a sigh, and going to the window, looked out with a feeling of desolation over the wide estate which was to be hers.

M. de Gaillefontaine sighed also as he retired from the room: it was not a scene for him to act in.

The solicitor brought with him the last will made by him for Gregory Biron. It

was brief. He left all his property solely and exclusively to his granddaughter René.

When the reading was concluded M. de Gaillefontaine strolled into the garden and smoked his cigar serenely.

He had a habit when he was pleased of humming as he smoked. There was no air in the tune he hummed; it was simply a gentle intonation of harmonious notes, like the sound caused by the wind upon the strings of an Æolian harp. His steady step upon the damp gravel and this vague tune of his attracted the attention of Mr. Fox, who was musing in the shade. He smiled, and, taking a turn of the path, presently met M. de Gaillefontaine face to face.

'Ah, my Mr. Fox, it is you?'

'The calm of the evening is in keeping with the event of the day, M. de Gaillefontaine.'

M. de Gaillefontaine sighed and said, 'You and I, Mr. Fox, we are the least covetous of men. Lo, we smile when others would bend their brows in anger! Mr. Gregory has left us nothing—neither you nor me. And now what shall you do?'

'Perhaps I shall stay here. What will you do?'

M. de Gaillefontaine was amused, but he said to himself, 'This slog is very stupid.' Then he addressed himself to Mr. Fox in answer to his question.

'Perhaps I shall stay here too, my friend. So much depends upon Miss Biron.'

Mr. Fox smiled and shook his head; M. de Gaillefontaine opened his round eyes in astonishment. This Englishman's density was surprising; he could not see satire nor fact.

'You have heard the will read?' asked M. de Gaillefontaine.

Mr. Fox smiled and nodded, without speaking.

M. de Gaillefontaine shrugged his shoulders, and said with nonchalance,

'Ah, well, we shall hear what Miss Biron says to-morrow.'

'That is why I think we should talk together to-night, and settle what we shall do with her.'

'We—you and I?'

'You and I.'

'You are very droll, mister.'

'The affair, you will see, is not so serious for me as it is for you.'

M. de Gaillefontaine threw aside his cigar, cleared his throat, crossed his arms *à la* Napoleon, and said magnificently,

'Mister, there is time for all manner of things. I do not understand English wit,

my God, no. Speak seriously, or consider yourself under immediate notice to leave this estate. I am the agent of Miss René Biron.'

The smile never quitted Mr. Fox's face, and he said whisperingly, 'This is not a question of whether you shall turn me out, but whether I shall turn you and Miss Biron out. Comprenez-vous, monsieur? You have heard a will read that was written a year ago; you may have to listen to one that was written last week. How is that? Is that droll?'

'Have you got that will?' asked M. de Gaillefontaine after a minute of reflection.

'No; but if I had you would not get it from me. Tom Reynolds the gardener is over there, see; he would come if I called, and he is stronger than you. And now, monsieur, as an answer to my question—will it be agreeable to you to talk with me

to-night, before Miss Biron makes it impracticable? Shall we amiably, as suits our joint interests, settle what we shall do with the young lady and her two hundred thousand pounds?'

'We will talk about it here.'

'Not so; it is cold, and the evening is closing in. I am nervous in the dark, M. de Gaillefontaine. I am older than you—more infirm. Shall we go indoors?'

'At your pleasure, mister. After you.'

'I would prefer to follow you.'

Mr. Fox drew back, and M. de Gaillefontaine passed him and marched on in front with superb indifference; but he murmured to himself, 'This Fox is no slog; he is a reptile, and I have been most deceived.'

'Shall you do me the honour to come to my rooms, or shall you prefer an interview in your own apartment?'

'We will go into the library.'

'But Miss Biron takes her tea there.'

'You and I will take tea with her.'

'I do not like tea—bah! it is medicine. I have taken my coffee; it is sufficient. I have no appetite.'

'I have, monsieur; and I like tea.'

M. de Gaillefontaine paused on the steps of the house, and said, 'You will pardon me, but I see not your motive in making an interview in the presence of Miss Biron. If this is true which you tell me, and Miss Biron hears of it, she will of herself, of her own will, give up the property. She will not be party to this our little transaction. She is proud, for her mother was of France; she is honourable, and she has notions of justice, mister, which are unappreciated by you and me.'

'What you say does credit to your sagacity, monsieur. If she heard of this will she would not take advantage of the other;

her father was English, and that is why I would have this interview in her presence.'

'I do not understand. I am very stupeed.'

'Monsieur, I never contradict. I will explain. As you pointed out, you and I are not governed by certain restrictions of justice.'

'It is true.'

'But we have an equal regard for the preservation of our possessions.'

'Also that is true.'

'Before you agree to accept the conditions I shall impose upon suppressing Gregory Biron's latest will, you will doubtless desire to see it.'

'Yes, yes; oh, yes!'

'It would be not difficult for you to take it from a weak unprotected old man; but you would not be so rash as to use

violence towards him if he, by saying some five or six words to a lady in the room, could defeat your end. Now you perceive why I should like to take tea with you and Miss Biron. It is for your joint benefit.'

'But Miss Biron—she hates you.'

'But she loves you, M. de Gaillefontaine, and will be glad to receive your friend kindly. You are such masters of finesse, you French gentlemen. Whilst I fetch the document you will arrange with Miss Biron that she shall not leave the room until I have found an opportunity of proving the existence of this will to you. See how thoughtful I am of your welfare! Now go.'

Mr. Fox was right in his supposition; when he entered the library René received him with formal politeness, replied to his remarks, gave him tea, and presently claiming his indulgence, took a seat by the fire with a book and read. She reclined in a

chair and faced the gentlemen at the table; anything they did she might perceive if she chanced to raise her eyes. Mr. Fox, in a smile, indicated this fact to M. de Gaillefontaine, and said,

'It is surprising to me that the French, a people so sociable and disposed to unite amusement with the serious business of eating and drinking, have not a meal to correspond with our tea. When one's hunger is appeased, one loves to linger still over the tea-cup, chatting with an agreeable companion or contesting some sociable game like chess or dominoes.'

'We sit after dinner over coffee or liqueur—it is the same—and we play. Do you play dominoes, mister?'

'I am very fond of the game.'

'You will do me the honour to play with me?'

'It will give me the greatest pleasure.

See, there is a table. I will, if you please, remove my tea. Not if it is to disturb you, Miss Biron; pray do not move. Thank you. There, now, monsieur, we can engage in a friendly game.'

René resettled herself in her seat, and the two men removed to the table, Mr. Fox leading the way. As M. de Gaillefontaine followed, his quick beady eyes on Mr. Fox and René, he slid a table-knife from the table and up the capacious cuff of his shirt-sleeve. Seated opposite to each other at the chess-table, they were at the back of René.

M. de Gaillefontaine shuffled the dominoes. They drew, and played a game through with such observations as usually pass, and at its conclusion Mr. Fox smiled significantly. M. de Gaillefontaine again shuffled the dominoes, and Mr. Fox put his hand into his breast.

'You have drawn?'

'Yes.'

'It is your pose, mister.' As he spoke M. de Gaillefontaine cleared the table.

'Double six,' said Mr. Fox, keeping his eyes upon René and his adversary as he slipped a document under the table and began to unfold it carefully.

'Six-four.'

Mr. Fox had pasted the paper on parchment, and it required careful handling to prevent noise.

'Doublé four.'

'Four all!' said Mr. Fox, bringing the will slowly over the edge of the table.

'Four-five,' said M. de Gaillefontaine, his eyes reading the paper as it came up.

Mr. Fox had the top grasped tightly in his bony fingers; the formal introduction was concealed, but the conclusion, willing all Gregory's worldly possessions to his grandson Hugh Biron, was visible, with

the signature of Gregory Biron, and the names of Thérèse de Gaillefontaine and Silas Fox as witnesses.

'Six-blank,' said M. de Gaillefontaine aloud, and leaning over the table, whispered low.

'Blank-blank,' said Mr. Fox, and whispered, 'What?'

'There is no date, my friend,' whispered Gaillefontaine.

Mr. Fox, glancing towards René, shifted his fingers to display the date, and in that moment M. de Gaillefontaine seized hold of the will with his left hand; but Mr. Fox as alert clutched his side of the parchmented paper with the grip of Death.

'One-blank.'

The men rose silently. Each was pulling at the paper. Suddenly M. de Gaillefontaine shook his right sleeve, flashed a knife before Mr. Fox's eyes, and brought

it downwards. Mr. Fox snatched back his hand, yet retaining his hold; the knife went through the strained link, dividing it, and came down upon the table.

'Domino!' cried M. de Gaillefontaine.

CHAPTER XIII.

If only we could divest ourselves of immediate considerations, what mirth we might find in the grave affairs of our lives! There is a droll side to the most serious of our transactions. There was drollery in the scene enacting in the library at Riverford, and the earnest gravity of the actors added piquancy. Here were M. de Gaillefontaine and Mr. Silas Fox arbitrating the destiny of Miss René Biron, who, with the indifference of unconsciousness, was reading Molière within hearing distance.

On one side of the small table at her back stood the dapper little Frenchman, his closely cropped hair bristling with excitement; on the other the round-shouldered

Englishman, anxiety for a time displacing the habitual smile from his greasy face. Each had in his grasp an equal part of the will, and knew that in his hand he held an instrument which was to give the possessor fortune and a dominant position. Silence was necessary; force was necessary. But the means they employed to obtain their ends imperilled success. All three of that party might be ruined if the crackling of the paper in their clutch caused René to turn, and, seeing their struggles, to demand an explanation. It was no time for inaction; a moment's delay might be fatal to the hopes of the two men. One quick glance towards René, and the next moment M. de Gaillefontaine had settled the question of possession. The will was divided. The quick snap as the knife, cutting through the document, struck the table beneath attracted Miss Biron's attention. The eyes

of both men were upon her, and quick as the movement of her head they prepared themselves for her observation.

With the celerity of a man accustomed to the rapid passes of fence, M. de Gaillefontaine slid the knife out of sight, thrust the hand containing the half will in his bosom, and assumed an air of *bienséance* as he rested his disengaged knuckles on the table. Mr. Fox, with the subtlety of one by nature crafty, closed up the possession in his hand, and leaning with both on his side of the table smiled into the face of his antagonist.

René saw two men rising from a game to which one had just cried domino. There was nothing to excite suspicion; the sharp crack had possibly been made in triumphantly setting down the winning piece.

'Shall we play another game?' asked M. de Gaillefontaine gaily. The dramatic

situation was entirely in accordance with the natural disposition of the man.

Mr. Fox put his hand to his breast and sat down, whilst M. de Gaillefontaine shuffled the dominoes.

René closed her book and rose to leave the room. Mr. Fox looked nervous, and put his hand in his trousers-pocket.

'If you will allow,' said M. de Gaillefontaine to René, 'I will ask Roberts to find a book for me.'

'I will send him to you,' said René; and withdrawing ordered the man to wait upon M. de Gaillefontaine.

'I have ordered this Roberts for your satisfaction, my dear Mr. Fox,' explained M. de Gaillefontaine, in a low voice, and then instructed the man to look for a book in the further shelves of the room. He continued, addressing Mr. Fox in a tone which would escape the hearing of the man

at the end of the room: 'But you have nothing to apprehend, my good friend. A Frenchman uses his wits first, and if they fail he applies the weapon; but then he fights with a rapier, and not with his fists. My faith, he is not a plough's man. Let us commence, mister. We will try our wits. How do we stand? Consider!'

Mr. Fox considered, his hands still in his pockets; on his face a contemplative smile. He said softly,

'I have half the will.'

'Without a signature, and written by yourself. Good, my friend.'

'I can produce witnesses to swear to its being signed.'

'Madame de Gaillefontaine—mon Dieu, the fair lady you have the trouble to call my wife—one witness; yourself the other. Which shall be most believed?'

'Hey?'

'The man who is interested in ruining Miss Biron, or the lady whom you interested in ruining M. de Gaillefontaine? I ask which of these two shall be believed when they stand up to accuse us?'

'Miss Biron will believe.'

'But you are not so flat as to tell her. What good shall it do you?'

'That depends upon the terms I can make with the rightful heir. If he says he will give me three hundred pounds a year if I put him in possession of his property, I will take my poor little half will and Madame de Gaillefontaine and myself to Miss Biron, explain all, and live afterwards with a conscience eased of secrets. And now, monsieur, what will you do with your half?'

'My dear sir, this scheme, of which you have been so generous and so frank as to explain all, is so excellent, that I cannot do

better with my half than to use it as you propose. I too will go to our Mr. Hugh Biron. It is very kind of you to explain to me what carts you have in your hand.'

Mr. Fox did not relax the muscles of his face, but there was speculation in his eyes, as he thoughtfully fingered his chin and looked into his opponent's face. Presently he said smoothly,

'Consideration will incline you to do no such thing, monsieur. If Mr. Biron should be as honourable as his cousin he will refuse to accept your offer, and at the same time will inform Miss Biron of her steward's duplicity. No such consideration will affect me. I have no position to endanger.'

Now M. de Gaillefontaine became thoughtful. At length a smile lit up his face, and he said,

'Mr. Fox, I have done you injustice.

You have wit. I apologise for having doubted it. It will make me proud to call you my friend.'

'How much would you give for the privilege?'

'One hundred and fifty pounds a year.'

'One hundred and fifty pounds per annum?'

'It is a sum not worth losing, mister. You shall have a year in advance to-morrow morning, when you leave the house.'

'And the will—your half?'

'I will keep, and you shall keep yours. It will put into our memory the mutual obligation we enjoy. They are not worth contesting—these little pieces of parchment and paper. If Miss Biron and Mr. Biron will not believe you, will they believe these? Their only use is to remind us of our obligations, as I have said. And we will each

keep our part. I am resolved; will you accept my terms?'

After a few minutes' reflection Mr. Fox rose, and said,

'You will of course destroy your part; and as I see no method of preventing you, monsieur, I will accept your conditions.'

'You shall have the money, my good friend, to-morrow morning, and regularly year after year so long as you continue my good, my silent friend. Good-night.'

Mr. Fox retired to his room, in which he was to sleep for the last time, and, seating himself, thought deeply. He had entered into a treaty, but it was in common with all treaties, and he, in common with all rascals, could break it if it served his purpose. He felt that he had done the best which circumstances permitted him to do, and, under the inability to get more, was satisfied to receive the amount

M. de Gaillefontaine offered. But was this income assured to him? This was the question upon which Mr. Fox's mind was most unsettled. Clearly the Frenchman would not pay if he could avoid it; and Mr. Fox knew him too well to believe that he knew him thoroughly. One rascal always doubts another, for honesty does not exist amongst thieves. Because Mr. Fox would have no scruple in breaking the treaty if it served his purpose, he suspected that M. de Gaillefontaine would be similarly unscrupulous, and he strove to imagine in what way his antagonist could evade his obligation. In the first place, would he destroy his portion of the will, and so preclude its recovery by Mr. Fox? Or would he preserve it, with a view to getting the other half, and using the whole for some purpose of which Mr. Fox was at present ignorant? The uncertainty agitated Mr. Fox. He opened his

window, and looked across to the wing where M. de Gaillefontaine's apartments were situated. M. de Gaillefontaine was at that moment letting down his venetian blind.

Mr. Fox, after regarding the heavens for a time, closed his window, and so arranged his blind that the light shining through might be seen from M. de Gaillefontaine's window. Then he took off his boots and drew on a pair of slippers, which by long use seemed to have acquired the oily silent character of their wearer. He opened his door and went into the passage with his boots; seeing nobody about, he put them down, and standing on the outer side, closed his door. He buttoned his coat closely, proceeded along the passage and down the stairs into the vestibule, and thence he ascended the staircase leading to the wing. He paused upon the landing. So far he had

made his way without meeting any one, but now he heard a maid-servant humming in one of the rooms adjacent. He turned to descend, but found by the voice and light that the servant had left the room and was coming towards him. M. de Gaillefontaine's rooms were upon the floor above; but were his doors open, he could hear voices upon the stage beneath. Mr. Fox was preparing for a hasty descent in order to avoid being addressed by the servant, when an alteration in the sound of her voice showed him that she had entered another room. Quick as thought he turned about, hastened across the landing, and was upon the upper stairs when she came to view. She ran down-stairs, and Mr. Fox breathed freely. Now he stole upwards, his senses straining for any indication of M. de Gaillefontaine. All was dark and silent. He reached the passage leading to the rooms and could see no

light, but he heard the muffled sound of M. de Gaillefontaine's peculiar song without tune. He had heard it frequently, and only when he had reason to suppose M. de Gaillefontaine was engaged in pleasurable reflection. Mr. Fox believed that it boded him no good; but it served him as a guide now, and assured him that his presence was not suspected. He crept to the door with bated breath, and felt for the keyhole. But the key was so turned that there was nothing to satisfy his eyes. He listened. Beyond the faint humming there was at regular intervals a sound which Mr. Fox was puzzled to account for. A 'click' followed by a faint surging noise was what he heard. Suddenly an explanation occurred to his mind, and he withdrew, feeling that he had not come in vain. He descended to the vestibule without interruption, and thence he boldly made his way to the

housekeeper's room, and begged her to lend him a needle and some thread. His wants supplied, he went to his room, locked his door, and seated himself near the light. Then he took his waistcoat, and with his penknife made a transverse slit in the lining. He took from his pocket the crumpled piece of will, and inserted it smoothly between the lining and the outer cloth of his waistcoat. When he had threaded his needle and tied a knot at the end of the double thread, he set about sewing up the document in his waistcoat, and for safety he passed the needle through the cloth, the parchment and paper, and the lining; and as the needle 'clicked' and the thread scratched in being drawn out, he listened with his head on one side and a smile on his face, as a musician might listen to a fork in comparing its pitch with a remembered note.

M. de Gaillefontaine had matters to communicate to Miss Biron that night, but before descending he arranged his toilet and regarded himself in the cheval-glass. He looked over his shoulder at his faultless back; he smiled, to show his white teeth; he curled his fine moustache; he applied a powder-puff delicately to his forehead; and then he went to the further end of the room to observe the *tout ensemble* from a distant point of view. He was pleased; for he saw in the reflection a man whose personal appearance was agreeable to the eye, a man of no mean aspect; one who might fairly claim distinction on account of his corporal attributes alone, as a clipper asserts its swiftness by the lines of its hull; a man who might make men respect and women admire him.

'Oh, yes, Mr. Fox,' thought he, turning away, 'I shall destroy that little evidence of

a will which disinherits Miss René Biron. Oh, yes, if I marry. But if I do not, it may be of service to me in another way. It is true, oh, yes! Ah, my fine mister—my Fox, you would be a viper if Nature had not fashioned you a slogs.'

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TWO KNAVES AND A QUEEN.

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A Novel.

BY

FRANK BARRETT.

AUTHOR OF 'FANTOCCINI,' 'MAGGIE?' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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TWO KNAVES AND A QUEEN.

CHAPTER I.

M. DE GAILLEFONTAINE bade farewell to Mr. Fox the following morning with every testimony of good feeling. Indeed he was not ill-disposed towards his less fortunate rival. It increased his own self-esteem to feel that he was acting magnanimously towards this fallen foe. He had tamed Mr. Fox, and had little fear of his viciousness being reasserted. In doing this he gave him credit for the wisdom of self-interest which he possessed. He had no dread of a conjunction between Mr. Fox

and Hugh Biron. If Hugh Biron possessed any nobility of nature he would scorn to lay claim to an estate of which he knew himself to be morally disinherited, even supposing he could be brought to believe in the frail evidence of legal right which Mr. Fox could produce. Should Hugh, on the other hand, be unscrupulous and proclaim his right, there would be no difficulty in convincing René that it was a conspiracy, in which Hugh bore no worthier part than Mr. Fox and the 'Madame de Gaillefontaine,' who were his sole supporters. Legally he could have no claim, since M. de Gaillefontaine held that portion of the document required to prove its authenticity. Nor was there a probability that Mr. Fox would tell René of her illegal position—the only menace which had disturbed M. de Gaillefontaine—since Mr. Fox was by no means the kind of man

who would sacrifice actual hard cash merely to gratify a feeling of ill-will.

René willingly agreed with M. de Gaillefontaine that a small annuity should be paid to Mr. Fox in recognition of his long service to her grandfather. She was glad to relieve herself, even in a degree so small, of the wealth which had suddenly become her burden. A feeling of dissatisfaction oppressed her when she thought of the manner in which she had come into the possession of her fortune. Her unrest was occasioned rather by sentiment than by reason; for she knew that she had done nothing to merit an alienation from Gregory's affections since the making of his will in her favour, and that her moral claim was as valid as her legal right. But at the same time she perceived that her position was the result of accident, and due, not to her grandfather's desire, but

to his inability to express his wish, and she felt as one might who, receiving an anonymous gift, fears that it should by right have been delivered to another. M. de Gaillefontaine reasoned excellently on the subject, and René listened patiently; but being a woman, and a very good woman, she was not convinced. She would have welcomed with pleasure any honest claim to a part of her fortune, and she made eager inquiry for any relative of the dead man's who might be benefited. The only kinsman known to exist was her cousin Hugh, and he was not be found. All that M. de Gaillefontaine could learn on the matter was that the young artist was abroad. It was doubtful, had he been found, whether he would have participated in an estate which previously he had formally rejected. René was not only shocked by the manner of Gregory's

dying, she was deeply affected by his loss, and chilled by the solitude in which she was left. Unlovable as he was, she had loved him. She had not sought for the motives which prompted the old man to indulge her desires, but accepted his indulgence as the simple testimony of his affection. She had loved him as much as it is possible for one to love where one cannot admire.

And here it must be admitted that René, the heroine of this book, was below the standard of perfection. Because Gregory Biron was to others tyrannical, harsh, cruel, revengeful, mean, exacting, she did not despise him. To tell the truth, she was sufficiently tainted with the weakness of human nature to put a higher value on his kindness and the pride he evinced for her, because to all others he was cruel, and despised every one but her.

Gregory had refused her nothing, and

forgiven her waywardness readily, and she loved him as children love. Her grief in losing him was the grief of a child. She was not numbed with affliction, as she had been by the death of her father; but, for that reason, she felt her condition of solitude more. Happily the grief of children does not endure, but whilst it lasts it is poignant. Who that suffers to-day can realise that to-morrow he shall smile? To René it seemed that she could never again be careless and gay. Only one room was more silent than it had been; yet had all these empty apartments been once tenanted with jocund life, the vacancy of the big house could not have appeared more fully.

René sat with her book before her, and looked at the page until the unread lines were blurred and the tears smarted upon her cheeks. She could not touch the piano, dreading melody, as one dreads the

pitying voice of friends who sorrow. It is the nature of morbid sickness to shun the remedy. Music or a pitying friend would have opened her wounded heart; but closing, it had healed the quicker. And yet she yearned for one sympathising creature. She was so utterly lonely; there was no soul in the world for her to love, not one who truly felt for her. Once she said to herself, sitting alone on the bed's edge, 'Poor René—poor little René!' and, touched by the pity of her own voice, she threw herself upon the pillow and burst into an agony of tears.

A woman cannot be happy unless there be one to whom her sweet arms can cling, whom her fond lips may press. She is as dependent for the development of her full beauty as the honeysuckle, which flowers, though it have but a rough and thorny brier to twine around, but having no sup-

port withers in stunted growth amidst the dust of its dead buds.

It is true that she had no friend amongst the men and women of her acquaintance; but it is probable that had she looked for one now she would not have looked in vain. In the presence of real grief women sink their meaner considerations, and suffer the noble nature to appear; but René offered none the opportunity of making her happy. She would see no visitors. 'The women hate me, and the men love only themselves. I won't see them. Take their cards, and satisfy their curiosity if it is necessary,' she said to M. de Gaillefontaine.

We must be blind by nature, or we must blind ourselves to the faults of those we would make our friends. René preferred to be friendless. She was too honest to forgive insincerity, and too shrewd not to detect it. Indeed she had an unhappy knack

of reading men's and women's unuttered thoughts. She could see that women were jealous of her influence over men, and saw behind the clumsy mask of their professions. She would have linked herself to a rude brusque woman, but such a one she knew not.

If the men were more sincere they were not less untrustworthy. Their regard for her was not friendship, not love of the kind she so desired. She knew she was the handsomest girl of her circle, and too certain of her superiority to be vain. It was not for her outer self she would have a friend value her, and that was all the young men suggested in their most flattering moments. 'One day Bess will throw me, and my face will be torn or my spine injured, and then these young gentlemen will leave me for the girl who takes my place in the field.' Even the elder men disappointed

her. She had given her company to one and another again and again, listening to their dogmas eagerly, accepting their counsel hopefully; but when it came to parting, something in their glance or the touch of their hand had broken the spell, and sent her home sighing, 'All men are—men.' Closely as gratitude and constant communication brought her with De Gaillefontaine, she was repelled from the unconstrained intimacy of friendship with him by the undercurrent of his thought, which even he failed to conceal from her.

Solitude is not natural to any healthy human creature, and the great quest of each is to find a fit mate. René had interested herself in dress and her personal appearance, had lent a pleased ear to flattery, had flirted, had performed a thousand foolish and wise actions, without being directly conscious of the motive which

impelled her. It was not until she lost her grandfather that she felt the great need of her existence, and even then she did not perceive it to be Nature's subtle provision for guiding her to select a husband. She fancied that a good and true woman would satisfy all her need.

Her habitual tone of thought had been the reverse of sombre. The foibles of men and women had been her amusement. It was not until she found herself dependent upon them for sympathy that their insufficiency became a subject of grave consideration.

René had a woman's discrimination, and a girlish belief that somewhere there did exist a being not mean, not hypocritical, not selfish.

Naturally her mind frequently reverted to her cousin. What she knew of Hugh suggested to her mind a man having at

least some of the characteristics of her ideal. He had independence of character, and that meant honesty; he was an artist, and that to her, who knew not that an artist may take a level with the mechanic, signified that he loved the pure and beautiful; but, more than all, he was her cousin, and to all women relationship is a golden link. The wish to find him grew and strengthened. She expressed her desire to M. de Gaillefontaine, and disturbed him greatly; but he sympathised with her fully, and loudly regretted the impossibility of knowing definitely where he was.

'But why should it be impossible?' asked René. 'Surely a professional inquirer would find traces of him. He must have left friends in London. Advertisements in the newspapers might avail.'

'Ah, it is true! Why did I not think of that? Who shall say it is impossible

until all means fail? As you tell me, there must be various means of discovering him. Let me consider how we may best proceed in this search.'

M. de Gaillefontaine pulled his moustache, knitted his brows, and closed his eyes as he turned over in his mind a few plans by which this threatened danger might be averted, and the cousins be kept apart. He was equal to the occasion; and suddenly slapping his breast, he said,

'It has come to me, a great idea, mademoiselle. Your cousin he is in the south of Europe, we know; why should you not go there to seek him?'

René brightened, and M. de Gaillefontaine continued,

'The dreary months of the year fall upon this country. See, the leaves fall; the house is dull: it requires alteration. Your friends—these proud iron ones—they

are not enthralling—my life! far otherwise. And you would find your cousin, the fine Mr. Hugh Biron. It is natural; it is good. If I may advise, I will say to you go to Italy.'

'I will,' said René.

'Florence, Rome—it is there you will discover him. You will buy pictures for your house: purchasers have the *entrée* to studios. You will ask where is Hugh Biron, and a thousand voices will answer, "Here!"'

'You will accompany me?'

'Am I not your servant?'

'You are my friend; I cannot forget that. You found a father for me; you shall find a brother.'

M. de Gaillefontaine bowed in silent sentiment; but he said to himself,

'Not if I can help it. Antoine will find no further relation for you, except it be a husband.'

But his mind was not at rest. Present

safety, the probability of future success, were not alone sufficient for his consideration. There were adverse possibilities in the future which were not less to be dreaded because they were unseen; and his plans must be laid to meet the greatest ill. He thought long and deeply before he lit his cigar; then his tone of thought became cheerful, and he hummed as he slowly walked. Thought he:

'Antoine, you have overcome a present difficulty: it is well. But there are others. Miss Biron does not recognise your value, my friend. Not yet. There are other young men than Hugh Biron—many. Do not forget that you are playing a dangerous game. Play boldly; and if you fail, let it be through no slip of yours. *If* you fail! pst, my God! You are a gamester. Shall it trouble you if you lose one game? Oh, no; there are others.'

It was arranged that René should leave England the following week, and M. de Gaillefontaine was not idle in the interim. He busied himself in the alterations to be made in the house—drawing plans, walking about the place with architects and decorators, and explaining to them his designs. René approved the alterations he suggested; but he considerately mentioned only those which would be agreeable to her in her subdued condition of mind. Such trifles as billiard-rooms, and a bijou theatre he left as a grateful surprise to her when she should return, gay and in high spirits, to the venerated home.

The day before leaving he called formally upon René's acquaintances; and when he was admitted beyond the hall-mat he discoursed freely on the future.

'*We* are going to the south of Europe for the winter.' '*I* am having the old

mansion entirely altered.' 'Can you tell me if my old friend the Chevalier Dolce-confetti still lives at the Villa Poloni? *We* must visit him.' '*I* am having a theatre designed for the new house; but not a word to any one. Observe: Miss Biron knows nothing about it. It is a surprise for her when *we* return.'

Thus he bragged, but not with a boastful intent. His visit had the effect of entirely altering popular opinion, which until then had favoured the report that René was De Gaillefontaine's daughter. What the relationship was which existed between them the ladies who knew most things could not imagine; but they wagged their dear heads, and in that manner took up the tale which their tongues could not tell.

The men would bet seven to four that René, if she was not already married to De Gaillefontaine, would wed him before her

return. There were a few offers of level money on the chance of their being brother and sister; but—possibly because no one would embrace the golden chance—a hundred to one was submitted in several places that they were adventurers both.

Radcliffe Clinker meditated suicide for four-and-twenty hours, broken only by ten hours' restless sleep; and then he rushed to Riverford, to make once more an offer to René of his hand and heart, and anything else of importance which she might please to accept; and was told by the lodge-keeper's wife that master and mistress had gone away that morning.

And these things fell out as M. de Gaillefontaine wished.

CHAPTER II.

Whilst M. de Gaillefontaine was carefully scattering the seed of hemlock, René sowed healthful grain. She left the preparations for her journey to the women who were to accompany her, and set herself to inquire personally into the affairs of her dependents and the tenants upon her estate. She made such concessions and alterations in their favour as seemed to her right and just and good. For this young lady had happily so little of worldly wisdom in her, that she acted upon those generous impulses which most people possess and proclaim until they have the ability to put their principles into practice. Neighbouring estate-owners disapproved her generosity, and took it as a

further proof that she was an alien from their society, and no Biron; but those who were benefited blessed her name, and vowed she deserved a better.

Tom Reynolds engaged her special solicitude, which was but natural; for his love of Mattie Blake was known to René; and she, having as yet no love-affair of her own, must needs, by virtue of her womanhood, interest herself in the sorrows and joys of others.

René could be queen and subject both. It is the quality of the greatest to have feelings in common with the lowliest, and of the noble to be guided only by their own decision upon the propriety of action. René was in every sense independent; and where inclination guided she boldly stepped, if she saw no reasonable objection to her progress.

The condition of Tom Reynolds was distressful. He was a slave to Mattie Blake,

and she was no better than other slave-owners. It is true she had forgotten Hugh, and sighed over his incomprehensible beautiful letters no more; and she had also forgotten a dozen other lovers who had praised her bright beauty. But she was an insatiable conqueror, and each fresh triumph fired her with desire for further victory. Tom had actually asked her to be his wife in the most unmistakable and fewest possible words; and she had refused as plainly, but in such a manner as to leave him a hope that she might alter her mind. She had the refined cruelty of a cat which plays with a mouse, and allowed him just so much love as kept his passion from dying. He took his place regularly in the coffee-room of the Ferry-boat; sang his song and drank his ale more or less cheerfully, as Mattie happened to be kind to him or to others. During the summer months the coffee-room

after dark was seldom without one or two gentlemen from London; and with them she exchanged glances that wrought jealousy in her faithful lover. He tried to be cheerful, and struggled manfully to exclude jealousy, as a meanness, from his heart; but he gave over whistling, and spent his breath instead in deep sighs. It was long before he would speak of his distress; but after a time it became his comfort to tell his thought to René. Usually he commenced the conversation by a philosophical reflection suggested by the work in hand.

'You asked me yesterday why I don't forget Mattie and walk out with another young party. Look here, miss; see this geranum, weak and sickly. Why doan't I pull it up and plant another in this pot more likelier to graow?' He turned the plant out of the pot, and continued, 'See heaow the roots have run through every

part of that earth. When I pull the plant out it takes with it all that can nourish life, and leaves nothing for another to graow in. I shall graow nothing but Mattie in my heart. I love once and no moare. I arn't a parennial, but a cactus that flowers once and dies.'

'She uses you shamefully,' said René, who had a woman's intolerance of womanly failings.

'Yes, miss; but she doan't use nubody else shamefully, and that's why I know she doan't really love nubody really but me. If she served me same as them I'd—there, I doan't know what I'd do. Very like I'd do nothing. Sometimes I think I'll emigrate, and go right away from her; and then I says to myself, "Tummus, what a vool you be! Miles o' water won't seperate yeour heart from she; an' if yeou caen't be happy seein' her sweet face o' nights, how will

yeou be moare happier where yeou can't see nowt but wild savages and elephants maybe? Do yeou think it won't be night because yeou can't see noa star?"'

'But does she always neglect you?'

'Always,' exclaimed Tom joyfully, 'when there's any swell in the room. An' yet it makes me happy when she fills my moog fuller 'an all the rest; an' when she can see noan but the gent who's just come daown from Oxford, I feel as though the beer I drink 'ud choke me. That shows you, miss, how onreasonable we men are. But she deu use me as shamefully as she uses no un else. T'other day Sir Radcliffe Clinker's Gearge he says to me, "Tummus, yeou must be off yeour head to stand bein' fooled like that theer. Yeou might deu better," he says. "Widow Thompson she's sweet on yeou." "Yeou wait till yeour' a widerer," I says, "then yeou can marry her

yerself, since you think so much of her. She's good enough for yeou, she arn't for me," says I. Then he says, "Well, she's better 'an Mattie Blake, for *she's* false to every man." He didn't say noa moare; for I give un such a thoomp side of hes face as give un summit else to think of. No, miss; if Mattie is not all I sometimes wish she was, it may be it's because she's better. I won't be one to say she's not perfect. If she arn't, it's just because she can't help it. Roses won't graow witheout thorns. She is so young and so pretty; and if fine gentlemen tell her so, she can't help but be pleased. I'm preoud to see her admired, and I wouldn't have her lose the pleasure her beauty brings her. I don't despair. One day she will think seriously, I do believe.'

'She will marry you when she finds herself deserted by others.'

'That's what I hope,' said Tom cheerfully. 'When these gentlemen all go away, she'll think that there's one as never deserts her; one as will do what none of those swells will; one who will give her a home and work for her, and serve her truly all his life.'

'Do you think she has any love for you?'

'I know she have when no one else is by. I'm not afeerd of her not loving me. If she was my wife she'd be true and good. It wouldn't be nat'ral for so perfect a flower to have a faulty seed under it. There's a right good heart in her pretty body.'

'Then why don't you marry her?'

''Cause she won't marry me.'

'But you do not try to make her.'

Tom Reynolds looked questioningly.

'*Some* women would rather serve than rule; and such women being made rulers

rule badly, because it is not natural to them to rule at all.'

Tom looked puzzled, and René proceeded to put her meaning into demonstration.

'Did you ever try the effect of staying away from the Ferry-boat for a while?'

'When Master Hugh and she were, as I may say, engaged, I stayed away.'

'And Mattie was very kind to you when you returned?'

'She asked me to return. And—oh, yes, she was very kind—for a time.'

'And since then have you tried staying away for a while?'

'Lord, yes, miss! over and over again I have.'

'And how did it succeed?'

'Well, I can't say that it succeeded at all; for you see, though I tried and tried, again and again, I could *not* keep away.'

René smiled, and said,

'Will you follow my directions, Reynolds?'

Tom fidgeted sheepishly, and said he hoped he had never been found wanting in obedience.

'Then obey me now. I am going to London to-morrow morning; be in readiness to accompany me. But do not tell Mattie of your going.'

'No fear of that, miss; she doan't give me a cheance o' saying healf as much as that to her.'

In the morning, with Tom Reynolds as bodyguard, René went to London, where she had certain purchases to make for her approaching journey. It was also her purpose to separate if she could the lovers whose happiness she sought to establish. She was convinced that if the tables were turned upon Mattie she would become sup-

pliant, and that her marriage might follow. She agreed with Tom that the girl was good at heart, and would make a true and faithful wife, especially if she were removed from the temptation to listen to flattery.

At an estate-agent's she learnt that there was a nursery in Brixton to let with immediate possession, and thither she went, and took Tom's opinion as to the advisability of speculating in the business.

'If I had the money, miss, I'd take it myself—that is, if—'

'If you had a wife to make the house comfortable?'

Tom sighed.

'How long will it take to put the house in repair, furnish it, and make it quite fit to live in?'

'If I were about, to look that the men stuck to their work, I'd see it through in a fortnight.'

'Then set about it this very day, and when it is finished come to me.'

Tom looked uneasy and reflective, but his rising arguments were kept down by René's.

'You will furnish the house as if it were for yourself,' said she. 'Do not spare expense. I intend it to be a comfortable home for one I respect; think of that. I will instruct my solicitor to furnish you with what money you require; and if you want anything from Riverford write for it. Here is money for your immediate use; the agent shall meet you here to-morrow. And now I must tell you that I am doing something for Mattie Blake's good; and you must promise me not to write to her until I give you permission. I will let you know where you may find me when your work here is finished.'

Tom Reynolds had a shrewd idea as to

René's intention, but modesty and gratitude forbade him to openly see it, or to urge a request that he might be allowed to go back to Riverford for the things he required.

René closed with the estate-agent, went to her solicitor, made her purchases, and returned alone to Riverford. The following morning she sent for Mattie.

The little coquette came in her best, and looked prettier than a picture. The brightest ribbons seemed not inharmonious upon her, nor otherwise than a confusion of wild flowers from the midst of which rises a garden rose. She tripped up the broad path with saucy gaiety, looking this way and that expectantly. She believed that somewhere she should see Tom. She was piqued by his absence the previous evening, which was more noticeable because there was not a soul to pay attentions to her. She would

have been kind to him had he come; disappointment turned her sweetness to gall, and she hoped to see him, that she might revenge herself by cutting him. He was not to be seen, and her heart fell; but she would not suffer her manner to betray her in the presence of Miss Biron.

'I am going abroad,' said René, 'and I want a young woman to attend me. Do you think you should like to accept the situation for a few weeks?'

'There is nothing in the world I would like better,' answered Mattie joyfully, as vengeance upon the offending lover, the glory of mixing with real gentlefolks, and of seeing handsome 'foreigners' flooded her mind with delight.

'Could your father spare you?'

Mattie was certain her father would do anything to oblige Miss Biron; he was her tenant, and she had ordered his weirs to be

put in repair at her own expense; and, moreover, the season was past, and there were no gentlemen, no visitors, at the Ferry-boat.

'And you will not mind leaving all your friends in Riverford?'

'Oh, dear, no!' said Mattie, with a toss of the head, and thinking of the offending Tom.

'I will write to your father, and if you have his consent, you can make your preparations at once. I shall leave England on Monday.'

An hour later Mattie was in her room, surrounded by the entire stock of her finery, making a selection of the things she would take with her, and rehearsing the while the nonchalant speech with which she would inform Tom Reynolds of her intention of leaving Riverford. She anticipated the dejection with which he would hear of

her intention, and the tender speech which it would probably move him to, and which she certainly would reply to with a coolness that must cut him to the heart. There was no Tom to hurt that night, nor the next, which was Sunday, and she only suffered. But if she shed a tear, it was of vexation and not remorse. The very triumph of her departure from the village was marred by his absence. But she carried herself throughout with becoming careiessness.

She knew of no specific cause for Tom's unexpected defection. She had used him no worse the last time he visited her than in the last fifty times. It was a mystery, and troubled her; but lest Miss Biron should think she was troubled on account of not seeing Tom Reynolds, she affected happy composure. It was a poor consolation; still it is something to feel that you have pride.

In the course of their journey to Dover René asked her if she knew anything of Mrs. Thompson, a widow. Mattie paled for an instant, and then gave voluminous information. She said the most spiteful things in the sweetest words of Mr. Thompson's relict, and showed plainly to René that she knew of the widow's affection for Tom Reynolds.

René asked no more questions, and left curiosity to further her plan. Her silence was torture to Mattie, who burned to know in what way Miss Biron could be interested in the widow. She dared not continue the subject for fear of betraying the jealousy she felt; and, moreover, her mistress had retreated into the further corner of the carriage, and opened a novel. She could but conjecture an explanation. It was a painful process by which she arrived at a painful conclusion. First she thought over mystery

number one, with its disappointments, in which Tom Reynolds was the principal figure; then turning to mystery number two, she recalled all the unpleasant things that had been hinted to her of Mrs. Thompson. Her lover and the widow became coupled in her mind, and at length mystery number two suggested an explanation of mystery number one. Her heart ached with jealousy, and by the time she reached Dover she hated Tom Reynolds.

The voyage across the Channel was bad, and not otherwise was Mattie. The stewardess had sufficient occupation with the ladies, and left their maids to comfort each other. Oh, how Mattie longed to be in the fresh air! how she yearned for a soothing voice, a remedial hand, an encouraging glance! She knew of one who, whatever her extremity, would have given her comfort and help. She felt she was horribly

dirty and ugly as she passed from the dreadful packet to the shore. The Frenchmen, she thought, were 'making fun of her,' they said things to her which she could not understand. Then her heart veered round, and she loved Tom as she had never loved any one before. In the hotel she could understand nobody, and she wept upon her pillow at night, and lengthened her prayer for the happiness of Mr. Reynolds, and begged that her heart might be softened, and that she might be a good girl in future and for ever and ever, amen.

She did not like Italian cookery, and foreigners were not half so beautiful as she had expected. They were dirty, and contrasted ill with a certain fresh-skinned Englishman, who when he stood near her was fragrant of geranium and moss. A letter from her father told her that Tom Reynolds had left Riverford, and, it was

rumoured, had taken a nursery in London. 'And no wonder,' wrote the parent, 'considering how miserable his life were made here. And so, my fine girl, you have lost the best chance you ever had or are likely to have in this world, and there is no one betwixt him and widow Thompson.'

'What do I care for widow Thompson!' cried Mattie, crushing the letter up fiercely; then dropping it she put her hands to her face, and began to cry.

She fancied every one knew the secret pain in her heart, and indeed it was as much as she could do to conceal it. There was no melody in her voice when she hummed, no happiness in her eye when she smiled. It was a misery to pretend gaiety. Her sweetest moments were at night, when she might cry upon her pillow without restraint. She looked forward to the night-time through the day. She would have

liked to lead up to the subject of Tom Reynolds when she was alone with her mistress, but feared that the mention of his name might bring the tell-tale tears into her eyes.

One morning there came a letter for Miss Biron from Tom Reynolds. Mattie knew the writing and saw the post-mark. She dared not deliver the letter into her mistress's hand. So great was her desire to know what that letter said, that for a moment she was tempted to steal it.

It was a straightforward business letter, with not a superfluous word, in which Tom Reynolds begged to inform René that the nursery was in working order, the repairs finished, and the house furnished, and that her obedient servant waited for further commands. René left the letter on the table whilst she went to her room to answer it, knowing pretty well what would happen in her absence.

Mattie crept into the deserted room, looked furtively round, espied the open letter, and pounced upon it.

Ah, it was all true what her father had said in his letter to her. Miss Biron had assisted Tom—perhaps counselled him—to leave his fickle sweetheart for the more dependable widow. That explained her inquiry for particulars relative to Mrs. Thompson. Oh, it was cruel, cruel, cruel! This fine lady had no sympathy with a poor girl, and Tom could make no allowance for that poor girl being giddy and silly. No, no; Tom was not to blame. He was always gentle and considerate and kind; but he was also a man, and would not for ever subject himself to her wilful wickedness. He was good, and Mattie only was bad—a wicked, naughty, naughty girl!

She ran to her room, and said this and more to her pillow. Not until midday

dared she appear before René, and then she kept her head averted as much as she might.

'You look ill, Mattie,' said René.

'I am,' answered Mattie, shaking her head.

'You know your way to the esplanade. Take a book there, if you like; I shall not want you until the evening. Drummond may go with you—tell her so.'

'I would rather stay in my room. I—I—I am not well.'

She sat down and fingered her apron in silence; presently her chin twitched, and the next moment she was crying again.

René was touched with compassion; and tearing up the letter she had written, she went to the office and telegraphed to her gardener.

The next evening a note was brought to René by Drummond, her maid. It was

from Mattie. 'If you please, I am very unhappy,' it said; 'and if you will not be angry, I should like to go home to my father.'

She was more composed the next morning, and René said,

'You shall go home to-morrow, Mattie. I expect some one here in the course of the day who will perhaps be good enough to take care of you.'

Mattie thanked her.

'It is very kind of you to find any one to take care of me; but I can go home alone, if it is any trouble. I am not such a silly girl as I was.'

'If you alter so quickly, it is high time I sent you home. If you were to stay here much longer your old friends might not know you.'

'They'll never know me as I was.'

She stopped and twisted her fingers,

thinking that there was one who would know her no more at all.

'And you don't care to make new friends of the gentlemen you meet here?'

Mattie shuddered.

'Well, the friend who perhaps will take you home is not an Italian, he is an Englishman. That reminds me that he is a stranger here, and possibly might have some difficulty in finding our hotel. I expect him by the train that arrives at six this evening. Do you think you could tell an English face amongst a crowd?'

'I couldn't help noticing a clean English face amongst all these horrid foreign complexions.'

'Then go to the station, and if you hear a man with such a face asking questions, introduce yourself and bring him here.'

It was a strange quest, and Mattie un-

dertook it with a fluttering at her heart for which she could not account. In all probability there would be several Englishmen at the station, and how was she to discover the right one? and it was odd to have to introduce herself. And was it natural that Miss Biron should be so heartless as to treat her illness and return home in an offhand manner, not even questioning her as to the origin of her unhappiness? She tried not to hope, fearing to be disappointed; and yet she viewed the slowly incoming train with such emotion that she had to cling to a pillar for support.

Officials screamed, conductors of hotel omnibuses shouted, travellers rushed about; but confusion had no effect upon Mattie. Three English faces passed her, yet she took no notice of their inquiring voices.

O God, there he is! His face all red and beaming, his fair hair curling down

into the pink nape of his neck, his blue eyes looking over the heads of the puny foreigners, his best light Sunday suit on, and his linen as white as his teeth. She would have rushed to him, but that her legs refused to carry her; and there she stood shivering, as though she were alone, in the cold. The pillar hid her, and he passed. Then he stopped to speak to a *sbirro*.

O that fool of a foreign policeman! he would neither understand plain English, nor give a plain straightforward intelligible answer. Tom showed a telegram; the gendarme saw the address, and in about three thousand words, and as many varities of gesture, explained the route Tom Reynolds was to make. At the conclusion Tom closed his lips, put down his bag, and took off his hat, for the convenience of scratching his head.

Some one took hold of his disengaged hand, and a meek little voice asked,

'Have you come to take me home?'

* * *

CHAPTER III.

The three asterisks at the conclusion of the preceding chapter I would have to suggest that seventh heaven into which reconciled lovers are transported.

You and I have been there; but can you tell me, or I you, of the joys we felt? Look at each star for a minute, and recall the full, deep, boundless joy that throbbed from your breast into hers—from hers into yours—and then you will have a chapter such as I may never hope to write.

Mattie and Tom were married at an English church, and they returned to England through Switzerland, where Tom made fun of everything which did not excite his pity. But how changed everything was to

Mattie! She could not have imagined a country so beautiful, so opposite of that through which she had come. O the glamour of happiness!

She clung to Tom as though she feared he might be torn from her if she relaxed her hold upon his arm; and looking sideways at him as they walked down *grandes rues*, it thrilled her with pleasure to see the evident pride he took in his young wife. People stared at him because he was big and good-looking, and strutted along as if he felt himself king of England; but he conceived their attention to be fixed on his wife, and the pride of Cæsar thrilled to the roots of his hair.

'As if it was to be,' said Mattie, the homeward sea voyage was as delightful as the outward passage had been abominable. Not a wave bigger than Mattie's hand disturbed the water; and getting behind a

crate of goods, Tom held her by the waist so closely that she feared nothing. Enough. They were the hours for which men fight and die, often in vain.

René was delighted with the successful issue of her stratagem, and less because it flattered her vanity than on account of the satisfaction she felt in having actually done a thing which she considered good. Her young soul was instinct with simple, yet high, aspirations. She wished to benefit others by her wealth; she wished to disseminate happiness by such means as she possessed. She hoped to be of use in the world, and to be recognised not merely as a beautiful creature, but as a good and lovable woman. She gravely regarded her money as a trust which she must use well. To her simple seeming, this union of Tom and Mattie was, though slight, a good beginning to a good career. It put her in spirits, and made her

cager to grow strong and healthy in body and mind.

M. de Gaillefontaine was also pleased. He was entirely a well-wisher with René as far as her physical health was concerned; her moral condition was for future consideration. He had his own views on the subject. Perhaps he regarded severe morality as a disease which disappears with youth, or the temporary affection which which forms a physical disability for pleasure. He had seen many men and women, and knew the peculiar phases which human nature takes on under various conditions.

He listened with becoming gravity to the wishes which René at times expressed, and agreed entirely with her serious projects. No one could have been more assiduous than he in inquiring after Hugh Biron. René's solicitude furnished no suggestion which had not already occurred to

monsieur's active mind, and been followed up by him to a disappointing issue. Every day he fancied himself in possession of a clue, and started in eager pursuit; as often he returned baffled and disheartened. This Mr. Hugh Biron was everywhere—was nowhere! He was a Jack-of-a-lantern and a needle in a bottle of ale! This kind friend's ill-success so obviously pained and mortified him, that René, for whom this fruitless scheme had been laid, begged him to desist from his search a while. There was no immediate necessity for finding her cousin, and she trusted that accident might bring them together in the course of that devious tour she was making. Unwillingly M. de Gaillefontaine gave up the chase, and relaxed his exertions in that direction only to increase them in a new means of gratifying René's high purposes. He suggested that art and music and the drama presented

a wide and a grand field for the exercise of her beneficence, but counselled that she should wait until her health was completely restored before she agitated her mind upon so important a subject.

He understood the girl thoroughly, and none was more fitted than he to guide her into the path which *he* wished to traverse. He studied her health like a physician, and gradually restored to her her wonted gaiety and vivacity. His knowledge of Southern Europe was equal to a bagman's; and as her health returned he transported her from beautiful scenes of seclusion upon the Archipelago to the animated cities of Italy. He diverted her thoughts from herself, and was pleased to note at the end of a few months that she spoke less of unsatisfied desires than of her gratification with things in general. It delighted him also that she concerned herself less with the whereabouts

of her cousin. She bought pictures of English artists wherever they were to be found, but in several instances she actually forgot to ask the painter if he knew Mr. Hugh Biron, an artist. It was not remarkable she should forget him she had never seen, when every day new friends were introduced to her, in each of whom she found something to interest her.

Dull, uninfluenced by lively emotions, the eyes wander impartially over surrounding objects, and see them as they are in their true proportions of light and shadow; searching with fear, they see only the darkness they dread; glancing with hope, they see but the brightness they desire. René's vision had been in the first and second conditions, and was now in the happier third. Excitement prepared her mind to receive happy impressions, which, in its absence, had absorbed the light, but felt the sha-

dows only. She looked for the virtues of the men and women she met, and found in each some trait of goodness; had she gleaned for their vices she might have had fuller harvest.

Ubi mel ibi apes. Friends swarmed about René Biron. Rich, generous, beautiful, sprightly—who would not know her who had the chance? Introduction to her was easy; any one who could paint or model, or sing or write, or fiddle or act, had but to make his claim known to M. de Gaillefontaine to be welcomed on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays at René's hotel in the Italian city where they rested. She took tickets for everything, bought artistic productions of all kinds, and used her influence where she felt it might worthily be applied to the advancement of struggling genius.

In her company there was no constraint.

Any one who spoke English or French might talk to her, and she would lend an attentive ear. In her reply there would surely be a phrase or a sentiment to remember, and talk about to-morrow in the studio or the greenroom. Diffident men she drew out, and sent away with the impression on their minds that at length they were developing the latent power of conversation. In her rooms the visitor was sure of good wine, good music, and talk that yielded treasure. For men reserved their wittiest thought for display before René. Story and epigram dated from René's last reception.

The company consisted chiefly of those who claimed to be of the aristocracy of intellect; but occasionally a titled patron of the arts was found in the rooms. His stay was seldom long or repeated; for the professional men were as jealous of their caste as other aristocrats, and those not

immediately connected with the patron regarded him as an outcast, and by doing their utmost to make him realise his position usually succeeded in rendering him in reality 'an outsider.'

The preponderance of René's friends were men. The women, with a few exceptions, were of the musical and dramatic professions. They were unaffected, and for that virtue René liked them. In return they liked her, and admired her with the genuine feeling which those only who themselves are admired can bestow. They told her to her face that she was the handsomest girl in Europe, and advised her not to paint until she was obliged. They were astonished that she had never been on the stage, and received her simple statement of her history with as much appearance of belief as they could assume. 'Your grandpapa!—ah, yes, very likely indeed—oh, I don't doubt it for

an instant,' they would say, and asked no further questions. Probably they wished their artless life-chronicles to be accepted on the same easy terms. They were good-natured jovial women, always willing to contribute to the entertainment with their voices; and when they were not singing or listening to their brother or sister artists, they talked without stint.

Certainly they gave tone to the conversation, and it must be admitted that it was a bold and open tone. The artists, who, though they professed to be free-lances, undoubtedly regarded the conventionalities of society, took their key from them, and adopted in that drawing-room a freedom of speech more fit for the studio. Thus René stood behind the scenes of life, and saw men and women unmasked, and as they are. Was it for good or ill?

Perhaps the tales that were told, and the

things that were said, in her hearing were not what we would have our young sister lend ear to; possibly the talk was louder than is elegant, freer than is polite. But men and women spoke boldly, and that divested their subject of that insidious bane —pruriency. These people called a spade a spade; but they meant no more than they said. There was no implied indelicacy in their dialogue—every word was honest. It was the speech of Goldsmith rather than Sterne. In truth, I fear it was less pernicious than the refined wit whispered in Belgravian crush-rooms, than the covert meaning in supper-stairs badinage, which mamma, of course, knows nothing about, thanks to the witless age in which papa lived a young man.

They called her the queen of Bohemia. The special requirements of such a queen she had—perfect independence of thought

and action, *bonhomie*, and an enthusiastic admiration for the good and beautiful. In her manner too there was an easy balance of the freedom which encourages and the reserve which restricts, that excited love and commanded respect.

The strange and anomalous position in which she appeared led men and women to suspect her wrongly, whilst they knew her position better than they knew her. But the honesty of her thought and intention was so evident in all she said and did, that like a spell it charmed away suspicion. Then it appeared but natural that one exceptionally conditioned should take a stand apart from the ranks of ordinary women. Never had queen subjects more loyal and devoted.

Flushed with health, unfettered, flattered by gifted men and women whom she admired, conscious that she stood unrivalled

in beauty and power, this young queen was likely to need a wise and faithful adviser.

Her spirits were always high when she was in the saddle, and there were few moments during the day allowed her for reflection. Her friends never failed to interest her; and when they were absent that watchful attendant, M. de Gaillefontaine, devoted himself to her amusement. Nevertheless she found time for thought, and, listening to the still small voice, was less satisfied with her position than her behaviour in public expressed.

After one of her levées, when the guests were gone, the lights extinguished, the last servant sleeping, René returned to the deserted drawing-room with her chamber-light, impelled by a motive for which she could not account. She held the light above her head and looked around.

'Nothing but emptied glasses,' she said.

She set down the light, and seated herself amidst the confusion of chairs and tables, folding her hands in her lap, and giving up her mind to contemplation.

How was she using the power given her with wealth? What noble cause did she serve? Were these the noblest of men and women whom she had taken for her associates, and were they or their arts benefited by her? Did they seek anything higher than admiration and the pleasing of their senses? Was there nothing to show for her aspirations but emptied glasses? Was she better than they, or her delights higher? Would she have these grave self-questionings, but that none was by to flatter her, no music or colour to satisfy her sensuous nature? Did she not look forward even now with a sense of relief to the gaiety of to-morrow? And until her beauty faded and her friends forsook her,

would she not continue to live from night to night looking forward with delight to the nearest pleasure, with dread to all beyond?

These questions made the poor girl unhappy beyond her deserts. For conscience, that found fault with her present mode of life, suggested no better, but, like a harsh physician, told her she was sick, and left her to die. And amongst all her friends there was not one to counsel her unselfishly.

As for M. de Gaillefontaine, there were those who already called him the Marquis of Carabas.

CHAPTER IV.

M. DE GAILLEFONTAINE was, as the phrase goes, in his element. That element was one of display and ostentation, and exactly suited the tastes of the vain theatrical little Gascon. He rode beside René in the morning, and participated fully in the admiration and attention she attracted. He sat at her side or stood behind her chair at the Opera, and verily believed that half the lorgnettes turned upon René's box were directed to him. At her assemblies he was everywhere by turns, but nowhere long. Wherever there was a cluster of talkers he made himself its centre. He ordered everything ; he knew every one. Wherever he went he heard his name whispered. It

was impossible for one so prominently obliging, polite, *bienfait*, to escape the malicious envy of those who received benefits through him.

'Monsieur de Gaillefontaine, Monsieur de Gaillefontaine, Monsieur de Gaillefontaine—I have heard that name resounded ten times in five minutes,' growled a *basso profondo*, whose name was never heard. 'M. de Gaillefontaine, bah! Marquis de Carabas!'

The title was caught up by the people of the theatre, and the *basso* was mentioned as having said a good thing.

M. de Gaillefontaine was not offended by his importance being recognised. Possibly he objected to the name of Carabas; but the title beliked him. It might look well on a card one day when custom sanctioned the adoption of the rank given him by these players. 'The Marquis de

Gaillefontaine' sounded well. It looked good.

Beautiful Giovanna Raffiolli pinned him by the shoulders to the doorpost of her dressing-room, and carried the allusion still further.

'Answer, my Antoine,' said she. 'This beautiful ogress, who swallows up all the men worth having, you have made her take the form of a lion; tell me when you will transform her into a mouse, you cunning wicked Marquis de Carabas?'

'When you will consent to come and help me pick her bones, *ma petite chatte*,' answered M. de Gaillefontaine, in a whisper.

He was a great favourite in the *coulisses*, whither a basket of champagne invariably attended him. Giovanna Raffiolli and her sisterhood liked him and his champagne; and he adored the boards they pirouetted upon. He preferred them as women to

René. They had more than her freedom with less than her reserve, and possessed certain tastes in common with him, which were altogether wanting in Miss Biron. Besides, he had known the latter so long, that he had become almost as indifferent to her charms as if he had been her husband. Of course he would marry her if necessity required, for marriage would not interfere with his affection for the Raffiolli sisterhood.

'*Mon Dieu!* what would these wives have? a husband and a lover in one—like the Song of Solomon and the Lamentations of Jeremiah bound together in one sober cover! It is droll, that is true.'

At present marriage was not necessary. The situation of affairs was equal to M. de Gaillefontaine's desires; it would be time to think seriously of improving his position when his present condition—with which he

was content, oh, yes—was jeopardised. He was not apprehensive of change. René showed him no signs of flagging interest or of reactionary excitement. There was no reason why her excitement should not be sustained, or even increased. He and she could win yet greater victories in larger fields. What would be the triumph in this Italian city to those in London or Paris?

M. de Gaillefontaine was an eagle of ambition, and could look into the brightest sun without blinking.

He recognised the possibility of René's preferring celibacy to union even with him, in which case any intimation of his desire to make her his wife would necessitate a separation which was undesirable. In these days he did what he liked, and held the purse. René trusted implicitly the friend to whom she owed her fortune,

and made no close inquiries into the particulars of his expenditure. He had a little banking account of his own, of which he deemed it inadvisable to inform Miss Biron; only in the event of her showing a desire to devote her fortunes to one man, he would step forward and reveal his feelings. Yet awhile there was no evidence of such a desire in René's behaviour; nor was there likely to be whilst her excitement continued, and each day brought men to her side as rich and as poor as those of yesterday. Why should she fix her attention upon one star, singling it from a constellation which numbered scores, and all of equal magnitude? If one were more conspicuous than another M. de Gaillefontaine was he, and he took care that none of his brilliancy should be obscured.

Like a cautious commander, M. de Gaillefontaine was not unprovided for ad-

verse contingencies. Two evils he had dreaded. René might fall in love with her cousin, or with a member of the respectable class of society as represented by Radcliffe Clinker.

René was no longer morbidly anxious to find Hugh, and if she met him his claim would be great indeed to make her devote her thought to him when so many men of mark strove to interest her. There was no reason for supposing him better than other artists ; his name was not famous.

The second possibility her present position precluded. The Queen of Bohemia was a title she could not readily shake off, and one which would debar her from entering the higher class of society. M. de Gaillefontaine hated the stiff-necked gentlemen—they were men who would not take a wife without careful inquiries into her pecuniary arrangements, and who

would strenuously oppose the retention of their wife's unrelated friend as a household god.

He felt himself secure, and rejoiced perhaps overmuch in his immunity from danger.

He did not consider that the greatest calamities are those which spring from unseen causes.

There came a letter from the solicitor in London, which, for two minutes, gave M. de Gaillefontaine trouble. Tapping his knuckles with the envelope, he asked himself whether he should show it to Miss Biron or burn it, and answer it on his own responsibility. This was the second letter upon the same subject: the first he had answered and burned; but this was not to be treated so easily, and the result of his considering was that he took the letter to René.

'A letter from our good Mr. Gray, your solicitor,' he said. 'I am enraged, *fâché*, vexed that I must trouble you with it; and it is an affair so simple.'

'Then why should there be any vexation?'

'Well, it is a bluebottle in the ointment. Here we are, so merry, so gay; why should we have a cake of that winter fog sent over to us?'

'To make us enjoy the sunshine. May I—?' she held her hand for the letter.

M. de Gaillefontaine was stroking his brows downwards with his hand, and possibly did not see the gesture, for he continued, still holding the letter,

'It is about this friend, our Mister Reynolds.'

'My gardener! I am interested in anything concerning him.'

'It is so, I know; that is why I ven-

tured to take upon my own back the responsibility of answering a previous letter concerning him.'

'Without consulting—'

'Yes, without consulting you. I am your old friend, and take the privilege of an old friend to do that which I think will most surely be of happiness to the one whose peace of mind I consider always, always, always.'

'You make me fear—'

'Yet it is so simple. The previous letter came when you were growing well; how could I show it you?'

'I forgive you the moment you cease to tantalise. Now, Monsieur—'

M. de Gaillefontaine gave the letter with such an air of delight in being forgiven, combined with a gesture which signified regret, not unqualified by hope, as no Englishman could learn to express by a movement

of his brows, shoulders, and back were he to study for a year.

This was the letter:

'Lincoln's Inn, March 10, 187—.

'Madame,—I apprised you in my letter of Nov. 12th last of the distressing circumstances attending the destruction of your property at Brixton, and received your reply of Nov. 14th. In obedience to your expressed wish, I acquainted Thomas Reynolds with your generous promise to absolve him from pecuniary responsibility and the payment of rent until his circumstances permitted. He has, however, this day paid the rent due at Christmas, although I am afraid his condition is not improved.

'With this matter I should not have troubled you, but that, from the interest you have displayed in the unfortunate man's affairs, I think it my duty to say that he desired anxiously to know your

address, with what purpose I could not discover. I shall be glad to learn whether you sanction my giving him this information, or whether you prefer communications to be forwarded through my hands.—Awaiting your reply, I am, madame, very obediently yours, JOSEPH GRAY.'

René bit her lips as she read, and her brow contracted. She turned upon M. de Gaillefontaine, and said hastily,

'M. de Gaillefontaine, I am sorry that you do not know me better. I *am* vexed—'

'And yet it is *so* simple.'

'Tell me at once all that you know. This destruction—'

'A house—a little house—burned down; no more. Why should I enrage you with a matter so insignificant?'

'But the distressing circumstances attending it?'

'Our Tom Reynold, he saved his wife from being burned. Is it not distressing? This Mister Gray, he should write *feuilletons*.'

'How did he save her?'

'He wrapped her in the blanket and carpet and pillows, as our Othello served Desdemona—only with different motives.'

'But how did he escape?'

'There, madame, you make me weep; I may jest no more. Our poor Tom was burned. He lay in the hospital; but he came out—'

'Well?'

'Blind.'

'Blind!' cried René faintly. The shock deprived her of strength, and she sat down trembling.

In the moments of silence that followed M. de Gaillefontaine enjoyed his success. He had told his story dramatically, and with

one word struck shuddering horror into the listener. It was an effect, a situation, a tableau to be enjoyed by the artist who produced it.

'Blind.' He reiterated the word of confirmation in a subdued melodramatic tone. He was careless of everything but his own identity, as all vain men are. If he had been a Napoleon he would have rejoiced in a Moscow retreat, to think that he was the author of a disaster which must appal the world with it horrors.

His exultation was brief. René quickly recovered strength, and with it anger returned. The levity with which De Gaillefontaine treated the matter incensed her, and he had insulted her woman's instincts to keep from her the knowledge of a circumstance which demanded at least her sympathising pity. This was a personal affair, with which she alone could deal.

Who usurped her power of doing good robbed her of her dearest privilege; who, in her name, did less than she would do debased her. Excited sentiments of this kind rapidly sped through her mind, and each added to her displeasure.

'And this is what you call a simple matter,' she said, with sarcasm in her tone and anger in her eyes.

'I would say again—but now with such regrets and such pain as my distress and your anger command—it is simple. The best has been done that could be done. What could you do that I have not already performed?'

'A woman's work,' answered René sharply, as she struck the bell.

She was downright angry. Her white nostrils played, her lips were compressed, and she walked up and down the room impatiently. M. de Gaillefontaine opened his

eyes; he had never seen René so moved against him. He was anxious now as to the result. René's anger was accumulating; the premonitions of storm made him apprehensive of evil; her present silence was ominous. She touched the bell again impatiently. There was no knowing what disasters might attend the bursting of this thunder-cloud, nor whom the lightning would blast.

'You will think, my dear miss, that your humble friend has acted only in consideration of your happiness; you will forgive me if—'

He had struck an attitude intended to provoke pity, but he now found it necessary to assume one which would inspire respect, for the bell was answered by René's English maid, who had not yet learnt to conceal her amusement when she found M. de Gaillefontaine 'playactin',' as she called it.

René disregarded him, and said to the girl,

'Pack everything that is necessary, and be ready to leave here to-night.'

'You are going to London?' asked M. de Gaillefontaine, with unfeigned astonishment.

'Yes,' answered René quietly, with the slightest smile of satisfaction, which showed that she too was pleased to be the heroine of a situation.

CHAPTER V.

Hugh Biron had no secrets from his chum Charlie Brock, and told the particulars of his interview with Fox, and of his determination to have no hand in that which seemed to him no better than a conspiracy against René. But Brock took another view of the affair.

'You are a flat, a sentimental ninny,' said he. 'I wish I had the chance of running for a fortune; I would not be beaten by a party of French adventurers.'

'Yes, you would, Charlie, if the conditions of running involved your partnership with a man you know to be a rascal.'

'I'll be bound Fox isn't such a rascal as this Gascon and his daughter are. Villany

is the only thing in which I would grant superiority to a foreigner. I see less harm in thwarting De Gaillefontaine than in permitting him to have his own way. Falconry is becoming fashionable, and why on earth should you feel compunction in accepting the spoil from your own hawk which otherwise would have fallen a prey to this greedy eagle?'

'I have only an impostor's word for it that De Gaillefontaine and René Biron are impostors.'

'And you have only their word for it that they are not.'

'I am tolerably certain about Fox's character; of the others I really know nothing. I will have nothing to do with it.'

'Perhaps when you find yourself pinched for a shilling you will wish you had not refused ten thousand a year. Ten thousand a year! Think of it. I can't sit still

with the idea of that fortune escaping you. Consider what you might do with the money.'

'No, I won't, or I may fall into your error, and forget principle in regarding interest.'

So Hugh dismissed the subject, and would talk of it no more. If the fortune fell to him without his action he would accept it willingly, but he would do nothing to get it through a man he knew to be dishonest in thought at least. Nevertheless he looked to the first page of the *Times* occasionally; and after the notice of his grandfather's death he experienced some very natural curiosity to know how the old man's property was left. He thought once of writing to René Biron for the address of his grandfather's solicitor, but a moment's reflection made him ashamed of the idea.

'My grandfather has discarded me, and

I have no claim upon his property,' he thought. 'If he had relented towards me, Fox, in his own interest, would have made the fact known. It has been left to René, and she shall have it without dispute, for any interference must expose me to ridicule or my own regret. If this girl is as bad as Fox suggests, she would be little disposed to part from any of her possessions, unless I could establish my legal claim to it; and if she is a decent good girl, as doubtless she is, then I should be downright ashamed of seeking to take from her a particle of that which is hers by moral right.'

In September Charlie Brock went to Wales, and Hugh, who at this time was devoting himself to figure-painting, was left in sole possession of the studio in Charlroy Street—a fact which was known to M. de Gaillefontaine when he advised René to seek him in Italy. Without the reminding voice

of his friend, Hugh gradually ceased to think of Riverford, and gave up reading the advertisements for next of kin. The winter passed away without his hearing a word from Mr. Fox, or anything to recall his attention to him. It was in March when, by the strangest accident, a young woman came to sit to him as a model who knew René, and told him that which on the face of it was a flat contradiction to the character Fox had given him of his cousin. He was told that she was beautiful and gracious; but he would not accept for absolute truth all that his informant argued from these facts. 'It is not the fashion for ill-doers to go about like stage villains, letting every one into the secret of their villany,' thought he. 'The girl may be simply unscrupulous; indeed, what this her partisan tells me suggests want of principle; and the very worst of women have been beautiful, and possessed

of minor virtues endearing them to those who see them only in their fair aspect.'

These very thoughts were in his mind one morning as he was preparing for the day's work, when Mr. Fox's card was put in his hand. He did not hesitate to give him an interview, and felt something more than mere curiosity as to what Fox had to say.

Mr. Fox usually dressed in a complete suit of black; a deep hatband and large kid gloves signified his sorrow for the loss sustained by Gregory's death, &c. And that he might not be deemed to wear his heart entirely on his hat and hands, he made his smile as melancholy as his pleasure in greeting Hugh permitted.

'Mr. Gray, the solicitor, has told you of our loss, Mr. Biron?' said he, casting his beady eyes about the room, as he took the seat offered him.

'No; but I saw the notice of my grandfather's death in the papers,' Hugh answered; and catching Fox's glance of scrutiny, he bethought him of covering a certain study of a female head that stood upon the easel, and with as little concern as he could assume he lifted another canvas and laid over it.

'Something he doesn't wish me to see—why? A woman's head, as well as I could see without my glasses. He wouldn't put that other picture over it, and then sit with his back to it, for any other reason than to hide the lower one. Why does not he wish me to see it?'

These notes and queries ran through Mr. Fox's head, and whilst taking off his glove he seemed to be considering how to open the subject of his visit.

'So you were not officially informed of dear Mr. Biron's decease. Hem! Doesn't

that seem to you rather odd, considering that as his grandson you had a right to suppose yourself interested in his will?'

'I have heard nothing from my cousin or her solicitor, probably because they did not know where to find me.'

'M. de Gaillefontaine is aware of your address. But possibly your *cousin* Miss René Biron is not anxious you should know of any alteration in the family affairs. Cautious people don't wake watch-dogs.'

'You are mysterious, as usual, Mr. Fox.'

'Prudent, Mr. Hugh; prudent—no more. We are quite alone, I think?'

'Yes. If you have anything to say you can speak without fear of interruption or of being overheard.'

'Then I may speak in confidence?'

'Yes.'

'It is very good of you to grant it to me, I am sure; and I shall tell all that is in

my mind without hesitation, knowing how thoroughly as a boy you were to be relied on for honour. Have you been to Riverford lately, sir?'

'No.'

'Then I may tell you how affairs stand there. I live in Kingsland; but I make it my business to go to Riverford occasionally, watching your interests, as it were.'

'My interests! Have I any?'

'Undoubtedly.' Mr. Fox noted with gratified pride the palpable influence his words had upon his listener; and Hugh was conscious that his face betrayed the excitement he felt, and yet would have concealed.

One may coldly enough decline to play a game; but, being engaged, it is impossible to avoid excitement when it comes to a division of the pool.

'I wish you would explain as clearly and briefly as possible in what I am affected;

for I suppose that is the object of your visit.'

'It is, Mr. Hugh. Your interest has been mine since first I had the education of your mind. I was saying that I frequently go to Riverford as a matter of duty. One can do so with safety now, for the Frenchman is not there; at other times I feel that I am risking my life in going near the place. M. de Gaillefontaine, sir, is one who makes means subservient to his end. Ah, dear, dear, it is grievous to look upon the scene of past happiness, remembering how it was in your dear grandfather's time, and conjecturing what it may be when the builders remove their scaffoldings. The grand old pile is being so altered that the fine massive brick walls will hardly be recognised. Think of that square solid old English building, so characteristic of the time in which it was raised, being so dis-

figured as to admit of campanile towers being added. The builders told me they are to be used as smoking-rooms. The solid mahogany furniture, with its costly horse-hair covering, the majestic four-post bedsteads, that made one drowsy to look at them, with their sombre hangings,—all, all are removed; and the decorator tells me that the interior of the house is to be ornamented and furnished in a variety of styles, from that of Louis Quatorze to the modern importations from Japan. There's a decorative gardener with an army of workmen engaged upon the grounds; and I learnt from the foreman that the house will be surrounded by terraces in the Italian style, and I don't know what else. A bijou theatre is being erected, as I learnt from the architect's clerk.'

'You seem to have a good many acquaintances there.'

'Yes. I don't know how it is, but people seem to like me—will tell me all about everything. But, indeed, the people in the village, and the families round about, know as much as I do. Every one is in arms.'

'What is the grievance?'

'The grievance?—that the place is being ruined; that the name of Biron, so long reverenced, is to be disgraced. They see that these foreigners are impostors; no one believes in them. The gentry will not acknowledge them. It is more than possible that they have gone to Italy to check the rising indignation.'

'What has she to fear from popular indignation? The property is hers.'

'It *is*.'

'Then there's an end of it.'

'Not at all, sir.'

Hugh fidgeted on his seat.

'What do you mean?' he asked.

'The property is hers now, but if every secret was revealed it might cease to be hers; and to escape investigation it is that they seek to check popular indignation by leaving England for a time. I told you in our last interview that this De Gaillefontaine and René were father and daughter—a secret I learned by discovering Madame de Gaillefontaine. By the strangest accident I discovered the lady in Soho, deserted by her husband and daughter, who now pretend to disown the relationship. Now by pointing out to this ill-used woman her wrongs, and by actually bribing her to do her duty, she exposed to Mr. Gregory Biron the fraud practised upon him by De Gaillefontaine and his daughter. With such a fact before him do you think he would leave his property to the woman who has now possession of it? But, sir, before I speak

further I must receive your promise of secrecy.'

Hugh hesitated even now to make an agreement with a man whose honesty he, to say the least, doubted. As he did not reply, Fox continued,

'I wish you to do nothing contrary to your high principles, Mr. Biron; but when I tell you that I am paid by these people to suppress my knowledge of their turpitude, you will see that for my own sake I must have from you a promise not to use my communication in a manner that would be to my disadvantage.'

'Whatever you say here shall go no farther. I think I may promise that without any injustice to myself or others.'

'That is all I want you to promise,' said Fox, catching at the concession eagerly. 'Now look at this.' He carefully took from his waistcoat the folded portion of the will,

and opening it rose, and held it before Hugh's eyes. 'See, sir; it is dated a month later than the instrument by which Gaillefontaine and his accomplice obtained possession of your grandfather's estate.'

Hugh read what was written, which was sufficient to show that Gregory Biron had willed his entire property to him, and then said,

'But here is only part of a will, and in your handwriting.'

'It was written by me at your grandfather's dictation, and was signed by him, and witnessed by me and another. The signed portion of this will De Gaillefontaine holds. Do you observe that this deed has been cut through with a knife? There was a struggle for possession of it. De Gaillefontaine held one half, I the other. He cut at my hand with a knife; and as I drew back the blade missed my hand, but went

clean through the paper, which we held between us. And now can you have any reasonable objection to seek to recover from such a man as that what is yours by right?'

Hugh's scruples diminished as his excitement grew.

'If your statement be true, I should certainly feel justified in—in—in taking the advice of a solicitor.'

'Are you prepared to put down the sum of money a lawyer would demand before entering into a case supported only by the feeble evidence you, unaided by me, could procure? I am afraid you are not. If you had the other half of this will, and such light as Madame de Gaillefontaine could throw on the matter, you might take your case into a court of Equity perhaps; but without these you can do nothing. Now I, alone, know where Madame de Gaillefon-

taine is to be found, and I, alone, know where the other portion of the will is.'

'If Gaillefontaine had it from you he is not likely to have it now. Naturally he would burn it, to destroy the only reliable evidence of its existence.'

'You do not know M. de Gaillefontaine, and forget that the property is nominally René Biron's. He can profit by it only so long as the amicable relationship exists between them. He is too far-sighted to think that their present friendship will endure. She might chance to marry one whom he disliked; she might restrict his use of her money within unpleasant limits; in a word, she might be her own mistress, and set him aside entirely, were he foolish enough to burn that half will. With it he can retain the dominant position he has taken in that household. If she rebels, he can bring his proof to you, and—'

'And do what you are doing now.'

'Exactly.'

Hugh rose and walked up and down his room, finding it impossible to calmly contemplate the game before him. Mr. Fox shared his excitement, and rose also to his feet as he said,

'It is not only an income of ten or twelve thousand a year you have to gain; it is not even the reflection that with competence you may be enabled to execute those grand ideas of art which shall render your name honourable—perhaps famous—in history that should solely occupy your mind: you must consider that you have a duty to perform to society. If you make no effort to prevent one man from robbing another, you place yourself on a level with a thief. That is a moral axiom.'

'I'll do it!' exclaimed Hugh.

'What will you do, Mr. Biron?'

This question at once showed Hugh that he could do nothing. He had been considering whether he might accept Fox's assistance, without reflecting how all-important that assistance was.

Mr. Fox smiled over his advantage; and as Hugh re-seated himself with something of humility in his action, continued,

'I will tell you what you must do, sir. You must trust me, and mistrust every one else in this affair until you see that I speak lies, and am not acting for you. De Gaillefontaine is more cunning than Machiavelli.'

'I will not listen to him.'

'Miss Biron, as we must at present call her, is still more to be avoided by you. If that designing young woman had a suspicion of what is now taking place between us she would at once try to defeat your plan, either by impressing you with a false idea of her character, or by rendering you careless even

of that through the fascination of her charms. I tell you she is beautiful. She bewitched every man in the county. She obtained from Sir Radcliffe Clinker an offer of marriage, and only delayed her answer until she was certain of your grandfather's property.'

Hugh nodded: he had heard the facts, and they justified the inference.

'In the same way, rather than go back to the poverty from which she sprang, she would entrap you into a marriage which would make her at least a sharer of the property she struggles to possess.'

'I am not likely to be caught, knowing this.'

'Pray do not let your confidence lessen your vigilance. Remember that your grandfather was deceived by her, and he was adverse to her and De Gaillefontaine. Exposed to her influence, why should not you—

young, ardent, gallant—be victimised? You must promise me that you will hold no kind of communication with her until the property is secured to you, and the De Gaillefontaines' villany exposed. After that you of course may do as you please. My safety is involved in the condition I impose. I will not stir a hand unless you promise this.'

'You are needlessly stringent,' said Hugh, with an uncomfortable laugh.

'Nevertheless I am inflexible in my determination. You can do nothing without me, and I must insist upon you attempting to do nothing if you accept my assistance. You must neither seek an interview with René or De Gaillefontaine, nor grant them one if they seek it.'

'I will agree to that. But you have said nothing of the reward you expect for your services. You are not entirely disinterested, I think, Mr. Fox.'

'I neither wish to gain nor to lose, sir. In the event of my failing to get the other half of this will I require only your continued secrecy. In the event of my succeeding, I simply ask a continuance of the income granted me under the present arrangement between myself and De Gaillefontaine—a matter of 150*l.* per annum, to which my services to your grandfather entitle me. I am not avaricious; and I do this for no pecuniary benefit to myself, but merely for the love of justice and you—'

'And revenge.'

'Well, sir, I will admit that the unfair advantage taken by that Gascon embitters me towards him, and I should be glad to see him go out of those gates at Riverford as he made me go out of them. As I said, he gives me 150*l.* a year. I want but your assurance that I shall not be a loser by my

endeavours in your behalf, and *that* only on condition that I succeed in getting the will from De Gaillefontaine. I ask you to sign no paper; I rely solely upon your word of honour.'

'If you have so much faith in my sense of justice I can hardly see why you consulted me in the matter at all, since the same confidence would have assured you that I would not let you suffer by exposing, in my behalf, a fraud against me.'

'Mr. Biron, it may be years before I am enabled to obtain the half will, and in that time, unless you were forewarned, you might be overcome by the enemy. The very knowledge that I am seeking to obtain it will show De Gaillefontaine his danger, and doubtless he will at once suggest to René the advisability of seducing you into a marriage which would, of course, free them from fear on my account.'

'How will you get the will?' asked Hugh.

'At the risk of my life. My enemy is younger and stronger than I am, and, to my knowledge, habitually carries a weapon.'

'Can I do nothing?'

'Nothing—until I give you the will. Yours is a passive policy. You must regard yourself as a person powerless to attack in the opening of a game, but all important to defend. Your time to strike will come. At present you must rest prepared to repel if attacked. You will be attacked surely if your whereabouts is in any way discovered by that woman.'

'But you said that the man knows where I live.'

'There are wheels within wheels. De Gaillefontaine tries to keep René in his hands. I will tell you a fact: one object of her visit to Italy was to find you.'

'I have heard—'

'How?'

'From a friend.'

'Then you cannot doubt her baseness.'

'If I believe you.'

'And if I produce the will?'

'Then I must believe you,' said Hugh, with a feeling of uneasiness.

'Till then doubt both.'

'You may never bring it, and I may unjustly continue to doubt her.'

Mr. Fox did not like the tone, and saw that matters must be brought to a close speedily. He cried with energy, 'But I will produce this proof of her turpitude. Fix a period—say twelve months from this day, and if by that time I do not produce the signature to tally with this which I give now into your hands, tell me I am a liar and a fool, and tell the De Gaillefontaines also; so must I lose my income and be

punished for my failure. But in justice promise also that you will do nothing to defeat my purpose.'

'That is but honesty.'

'Then you promise?'

Hugh was compelled against his instincts, and said, not without hesitation, 'Yes.'

'Then I begin at once,' cried the old man, with the quick firmness of youth, and as hastily as possible withdrew, fearful lest Hugh should retract.

He was elated with the prospect of occupation, having been idle for some time, and become heartily disgusted with the humdrum existence of an eventless life. His was the keen enjoyment of a hound unleashed, and the very smell of quarry fired his dog-soul with wild energy and excitement. He had no thought but for the success before him. His eyes were on the pavement,

and he felt as though he could fly over the ground. Turning a corner precipitately he ran against a woman, gave a curse, a transitory glance at the woman's face, and passed on with a new emotion in his mind. When he thought she had turned the corner he looked back, stopped short, and said, 'Mattie Blake—Mrs. Reynolds! What does she in this neighbourhood?'

CHAPTER VI.

'DID you see that female who ran against me?' asked Mr. Fox of a man lounging against an adjacent public-house.

'I see you run agin a female.'

Mr. Fox dived his hand into his pocket, saying, 'I'll give you a sixpence to follow her, and another when you come back and tell me the number of the house and the name of the street where she stops.'

The man snatched the coin and disappeared at the corner. In three minutes he returned.

'No. 30 in this here nex street, Charlroy Street. Thank you, master.'

Mr. Fox gave the money ungrudgingly, having received all that he expected for it.

'Mrs. Reynolds visits Hugh Biron, her former lover,' said he to himself, stroking his chin and walking now with slow steps and a gait conducive to thought. 'It must have been her portrait he was careful to conceal; from her he heard of René Biron's purpose in visiting Italy. Why did he say nothing of this to me? Is that young man playing a double game—looking over both hands before he takes his partner?'

Upon reflection this latter hypothesis appeared improbable. Nevertheless he saw the advisability of cutting the line of communication between the cousins, and determined at once to do the best he could to that effect.

The meddling gossip knew all about Tom Reynolds and his affairs, learning part from Blake at the Ferry-boat, part from Reynolds himself, whom he had visited several times, despite the coolness with

which he was received. Tom nor Mattie liked him, and Fox knew the state of their feelings thoroughly; but it made no difference to him, except that perhaps it added interest to his visits. He had not learnt that Mattie and Mr. Biron were on visiting terms, and this led him to believe that Tom did not know of it, as there were few facts which Tom or any one else knew, and did not purposely conceal, which Fox would not extract by dint of questioning. Under any circumstances he would have washed this mystery, with a view to getting a nugget from the mud he stirred up. He delighted in little scandals and the possession of facts which were best concealed. Excessive inquisitiveness was part of his nature, and allied with this disposition was a mischievous propensity to set every one by the ears. He was eager to tell Tom Reynolds that his wife visited Hugh Biron,

not that a straying sheep might be brought tenderly back to the fold, but that she should be worried and barked at and beaten, and be made the cause of sorrow and pain to all who loved her. He would have done this from purely disinterested malice, but as his own interests were involved he set about the task with unusual pleasure and alacrity.

Since Tom's misfortune he and his wife had lived in two small rooms at Kennington, and there Tom had learned to make wicker baskets. As Mr. Fox stood with his hand upon the door he heard Tom whistling blithely as the osiers rattled under his hand, and as he reflected that he was about to silence if he could those sounds of happy carelessness for ever, and might never hear that whistle again, he almost cheated himself into the belief that he was acting with compunction. It is

possible that even a bird-catcher who lives by cruelty does at one moment feel a remorse in setting into cramped captivity and darkness the thrush whose joyous song attracted him in the dappled shadow of the fresh and fragrant wood. Mr. Fox knocked. Tom paused in his work, crying, 'Come in,' and turned his sightless face towards the door.

'Who are you? I am blind.'

'It is I, Thomas,' said Fox, with bland sympathy. 'Do you know my voice?'

'Master Fox,' said Tom, recommencing his work, with no heartier welcome expressed in his face than in his words of greeting. He pretended nothing.

'I am here again. You seem very happy, my friend.'

'Yes, I am happy, thank God, and I've every reason so to be. I've larned an occupation, and don't miss my sight nothing

nigh what I feared at first. And I've got a wife that'd make any man forget his troubles, though he had as many as him in the Bible with the biles and blains. I deu think a wife like that'd make you happy, Master Fox.'

'Thank you, Thomas, my personal affairs are prosperous and good. If I seem unhappy it is for the misfortunes of others, rather than my own. Your wife goes out in the morning?'

'Yes. She won't be home for tew or three hours. She is wonderful quick, to be sure. She manages to get all her work at home done, and then finds time to go and mind shop for a friend who has an engagement elsewhere, and so is glad to give my wife a few shillings for the service. But how did you know she goes out?'

'I met her, Thomas.'

'You met her—ah!'

'Yes, near Tottenham-court Road. Do you know where that is?'

'Tottenham-court Road!' echoed Tom, pausing in his work for a moment. Then he said with a laugh, as he recommenced, 'You've made a mistake—'twarn't she at all.'

'Yes, it was. She wears a dark stuff dress and a thick veil. I shouldn't have recognised her but that I accidentally ran against her face to face.'

'Mattie in Tottenham-court Road! Well, it may be so. Likely as maybe she's gone an arrand for her friend.'

'Do you know her friend?'

'Not much. I've heerd her speak, and her voice is pleasant. She's a widow, poor soul, yet young.'

'Oh, dear! oh, dear!'

'What ails you, man?'

'Nothing; and yet—'

'Out with it.'

'Do you know nothing about this friend —about her acquaintances?'

'I know she keeps a shop, but I've never heerd nothing about her friends. 'Tain't no business of mine to pry into her affairs. Daresay Mattie knows all about 'em, for women deu talk; but it 'ud only be a fool 'd want one to tell him all they tew deu say.'

'I daresay you think it's no business of mine to interest myself in your affairs.'

'Maybe I deu. But we must all make allowances. You alway wars fond of meddling, Master Fox, and I daresay you can't help interfering with folk's happiness, no more 'un a pig can help walking into a flower garden and routing up the flowers if he finds a gate open.'

'You don't know me sufficiently.'

'Think I deu, sir,—'t any rate I doan't want to know no moare.'

'You mistake my motive in making these inquiries, and if you were in my place I am confident you would do as I do. You would not let a poor child be lost in this cruel city without making an effort to put her under the close protection of her natural guardian.'

'That's enough. I won't listen to nothing against the wider. Mattie's the best judge of her character; and so good-morning to you, Master Fox.'

'I shall not go till I have performed my duty. It is not about your wife's friend, but about your wife, I have to speak.'

'More reason I shouldn't listen,' said Tom, his brow contracting.

'But you must listen; and if you were stone deaf as well as blind I would find means to make you understand, for the sake of the poor girl.'

Tom rose quickly from his seat, with

anger in his face, as though he were about to forcibly remove Fox from the room. His powerlessness was evidenced by a pained expression upon his face. Then he burst out laughing, and, seating himself again to his work, said,

'Why should I mind your talking? If I am compelled to listen I am not bound to believe. Go on if you will.' He whistled; and Fox said, disregarding the whistle,

'This is the proper way of reasoning, Thomas. If I were to go now, leaving that unsaid which I have come purposely to say, you would justly have reason to reproach yourself if anything happens for not having encouraged me to speak. As you say, you are not bound to believe a word I say. Now in the first place I will tell you where your wife went to. She went to the studio of Mr. Hugh Biron, her old sweetheart and your rival.'

There was a momentary cessation of Tom's whistling, and he continued by an effort of will, but little melody could he command.

'You do not believe me. You have only my word for it at present. You think that though she was there her visit was perfectly innocent. So it may be. She may have gone with a message from her pretty young friend to this man. What business takes that friend from her shop we don't know. Perhaps it is business that could be transacted by your wife, who is also young and pretty.'

'Get out of this room!' shouted Tom, again springing to his feet, and this time catching up his stool. Mr. Fox stealthily changed his position, and said nothing.

'Where are you, you sneaking coward? You daresn't torment me if I had my sight. O my God, what a helpless creature I be!'

As he spoke he set down his stool, and his hands dropped by his side lead-like. 'If you warnt to hurt me take up this steul, and knock me deown wi' it. I will not call for assistance, and there's none by to check you.'

'You are the coward, Reynolds. You will not listen to what hurts your pride. You think only of your feeling being hurt now, not of your wife being saved from future misery.'

Tom was no sophist. He believed in Master Fox's cleverness, and was induced by this show of reason to believe that he indeed was thinking more of his own misfortune than of his wife's happiness. He stood in the middle of the room, his head drooping, his hands hanging dead, and listened patiently as Mr. Fox continued:

'Too much confidence is as bad as too little; one encourages, the other provokes

duplicity. It is your duty as a husband to listen to what I say, and to prove the truth of what I say, however unpleasant it may be to you. Now I tell you that your wife went into the room where I left her former lover a few minutes before.' Tom winced. 'In all innocence she may be there—I know nothing, can say nothing, to the contrary. She may have found out his address from her pretty young friend the widow,' Fox cleared his throat, 'and merely called upon him to tell of her marriage, or your blindness and disfigurement.'

'Disfigurement!' said Tom. 'Why, Mattie tells me I don look as well as ever I did.'

'Dear, dear! But surely your sense of touch must tell you of an alteration in your face.'

'I have fancied so,' said Tom, quietly passing his fingers over his cheek.

'Why, that shows your wife is a good girl,' cried Fox joyfully. 'She has hidden the fact from you, thinking it would wound your vanity to know you are no longer good-looking.'

'If it be vanity to wish my face may please my wife, then I am vain. Eh! and so I am disfigured?'

'Why, you know that your eyes were the finest in the village—indeed, your best feature, and the organs by which alone you could show Mattie how true and good your heart was. They spoke for you. Losing them alone must greatly diminish your attractions in the eyes of a gay, light-hearted young girl.'

The inquisitor noticed that his victim began to suffer under the torture, clasping one hand tightly with the other.

'Happily, wives if they are kept from temptation by constant companionship with

their husbands become indifferent to their personal appearance, as mothers do to their deformed children. Very often—if they have tenderness in their hearts—love grows out of their pity.'

'Pity!'

'I have no doubt your wife will in time settle down and become a very happy and good wife; but it is necessary that you should guide her carefully now. Think how young and gay and pretty she is, and that this old sweetheart is also young and very clever, handsome too, thoughtless, a gentleman—'

'Ah, he *is* a gentleman!'

'I admit that he is honourable; but you must not forget that every man and woman is subject to fall, and that acquaintances begun in perfect innocence have very frequently ended in guilt and utter ruin. I have said all I wish to say, all I

felt it my duty to say; and I am glad to leave you calm and feeling rightly for the happiness of your wife. But if I may counsel you before I go, I will advise you first to prove the truth of my statement, and after that you must act as circumstances direct. I will call upon you to-morrow at this time, and I hope to have the pleasure of seeing Mrs. Reynolds where she should be—by your side.'

He withdrew without many more words, for Reynolds was seated in deep thought.

Tom's simple honest mind was uneasy and troubled, feeling that wit was wanted in this emergency, and conscious that he had none. He could not conceal his disfigured face from Mattie; but a suspicion of her goodness would be yet more revolting to her if she were pure, and how could he prove her truth without her knowledge?

If she perceived that his heart was blind to her purity, and scarred with cruel doubts, then what in him would there be to love? Yet for her sake he must not disregard this warning. Long he sat silent and motionless whilst these matters revolved in his brain, and he sought for a 'clever' means of overcoming the difficulty before him.

'I might as well try to think of a new method to bud roses,' thought he. 'There be but one way to get at the truth as I see, and that's straightforward. I'll just ask her where she's been, and if so be she says, "Minding shop," why, then I'll know Fox is a liar, and she's my own dear wife.'

Yet somehow the honesty of his purpose and his generous faith did not restore perfect happiness to his heart. He sat thoughtful and grieved. 'It is certain I

am ugly, and that I feared is too true; why, I can feel the scar here yet, and my eyes are gone. What is there in my face to please a young wife? Young girls will be guided ever by looks; they were all I had—except love—to make me worth her having. She tells me I am not altered, lying to spare my feelings; yes, that is how it is, she lies to spare me.'

He repeated the words again and again to himself as his thoughts pondered over and over the suggestions made by Fox. He did not move until a well-known step upon the stairs awoke him to the necessity of appearing natural. He set to work upon the basket at once, his back towards the door.

'Working still, Tom dear?' said Mattie, entering briskly and coming to his shoulder. 'And only done that since I left you, you lazy old fellow!'

She slid her arm round his neck and kissed him as he turned his face upwards to her. His doubts vanished as her lips touched his.

'*You* haven't been idle, Mattie.'

'Oh, dear, no—minding shop as usual.'

She spoke hurriedly, with an assumption of carelessness.

'All the morning, I suppose, dear?'

He noticed that she hesitated to answer, and then spoke with her former haste.

'Why, of course I have, you silly old goose. How could I do else? Jenny has to be right away in Tottenham-court Road by twelve.'

She was laying her hat and jacket aside as she spoke, and the trembling of the osier under Tom's hand passed unnoticed. 'She lies to spare me, she lies to spare me.' These words beat upon his brain with mechanical persistency.

'You've ne'er told me where Jenny goes, Mattie.'

'Why, Tom dear, no more I ha'n't. She goes to sit to—to—artists and people, and they take her likeness, and actually pay her for it 'stead of her a-paying them. She's going out again to-morrow, so I must needs go and mind shop again. But I shall have twelve shillings come Saturday to put in the box, and all for keeping shop two hours a day.'

'Three hours.'

'Yes, yes—I meant three. Why, what's the matter, husband dear?'

'I ha'n't felt well all day, Mattie, and now I feel strangely sick.'

'It is through bending over these nasty old baskets. You shall sit here by the window, and do not another stroke of work to-day; and you shall not speak a word, but listen to my silly chat, till you've had your

tea; then we'll go for a walk together, and you will come back quite your dear old self.'

Concern for her husband's present condition diverted Mattie's mind from a consideration of his questions, which else had doubtless excited her suspicion. She bustled about, clearing the willows away whilst the water was boiling for the tea, and talked the whole time in a bright, sharp, little clatter, as musical and gay as the clinking of the tea-things she laid out upon the table. She charmed away Tom's distress for the time; and when they walked in the evening he talked much as was his wont, and showed scarcely a sign of the heavy care that lay at the bottom of his heart. Whilst her hand pressed his arm, and he heard her pretty voice and rippling laughter, he could think of her only as a creature to be loved then and there, and for all time, with his whole soul. It was when

her hand slid from his neck at night, and her deep breathing told she slept, that his thoughts referred to the charge laid against his wife, and his mind was vexed with sleepless doubt.

It troubled him that he could not accept Mattie's statement, and rest as he rested last night; but an instinctive perception that Mattie had deceived him, and Fox for once told truth, was not to be shaken off; and it was in vain he tried to persuade himself against conviction by saying, 'He is a liar, and she is not.' He tried to think of other matters in vain, and his inability to control his brain had the effect upon him which extreme pain exercises over men—he wished to cry out, or to pace about the room; yet he dare not move, lest the wife whose innocence he strove to believe in should wake and perceive his agitation.

He moved ever so slightly, and his hand met hers. Partially awoke, she took his fingers to her lips, and then laid them on her neck, sleeping peacefully again the next minute.

'What a hound I am to suspect the child!' he thought, his heart quickly throbbing, as if set free from bondage by that almost involuntary action of his wife's. 'Could she kiss me thus and sleep so readily under my hand if she were unfaithful to me? 'Tis I who be unfaithful, thus to misdoubt her. Were I pure as she, I too would sleep. My darling!'

As if to reward him for his better feeling, sleep came to him then.

The next morning he would have told her of his anxiety, of Fox's visit, and the injustice he had done her by believing Fox rather than her, but for very shame. By reaction his spirits were as light this morn-

ing as last night they had been heavy. A shadow fell upon his heart when Mattie bade him good-bye, but it was no more than that of a summer cloud, and presently his heart shone out brightly again.

When she was gone he turned the key of the door. 'I'll have no visitors this morning,' he said.

He chuckled when he heard Fox's step upon the stairs, thinking how disappointed the old gentleman would be in not having the power to work further mischief.

Mr. Fox knocked and turned the door-handle. Finding his endeavours to open the door unavailing, he said, in his sweetest tones,

'It is only I, Thomas — your friend Fox.'

'If 'tis only you, all right,' said Tom, and went on with his basket, whistling cheerily.

'But I cannot open the door,' said Mr. Fox.

'Why, that's all right teu.'

'Do you intend not to let me in, Reynolds?'

'I deu, Fox. Carn't see visitors this morning; I've other business that'll pay me better to attend to than yeour lies.'

Fox stood a few moments in thought, being at a loss to overcome the obstacle checking a progress which had begun so successfully. Presently he took off his hat, put his lips to the keyhole, and spoke; but Tom was singing 'The Red, White, and Bleu,' and all sound but his own voice was as inaudible to him as the falling of pins in a smithy.

'Damn!' said Mr. Fox, rising and putting on his hat. It was seldom he lost control over his tongue; but he was vexed beyond measure. He had looked forward

with much pleasure to this meeting, and it was so different from that he had expected. He assailed Tom through the keyhole once more when the patriotic song was concluded; but the first sound of his voice Tom accepted as an encore, and sang with increased vigour.

'Oh, what is the use of trying to benefit a fool?' he growled, straightening his back, and pulling his hat fiercely down over his ears. 'He won't believe you, even when you tell the truth.'

Again he considered the situation, stroking his cadaverous cheeks with his bony fingers; suddenly he slapped his lean thigh, and at once began to fumble his way down the dark stairs. Out on the open pavement the old gentleman absolutely ran, so eager was he to be doing.

A good workman undertakes no work without first acquainting himself with all

its particulars. Mr. Fox had spent the previous afternoon agreeably to himself in making inquiries of Tom Reynolds's neighbours concerning him. Suburban shopkeepers in the afternoon have little custom, and stand at their shop-doors as if on the look-out for gossip. Of these Mr. Fox bought trifles, and asked questions; many knew Tom by reason of his misfortune, and spoke kindly of him and his wife, telling all they knew. Amongst other things he learnt where the young widow, Mattie's friend, lived, and to her he now hastened.

Half an hour later Tom Reynolds heard the footsteps of a second visitor. It perplexed him, being a woman's and not Mattie's. The voice that asked admission he knew, and he rose heavily, and having opened the door, he returned slowly to his seat, and sat there silently, with his hands folded and his head bent, waiting for the worst.

'Tis I—Kate Eason. Don't you know me, Mr. Reynolds?' asked the visitor.

'Yes,' said Tom, and waited.

'And how is she now, poor thing? May I go into her room?'

'She's not there.'

'Not there?'

Tom shook his head, and still sat expectant. Kate took her seat opposite the blind man, and looking into his face could read there no explanation of his strange manner. There was the apathy which accompanies a sense of bereavement.

'You are cross with me, Mr. Reynolds, on Mattie's account. It was but a silly quarrel, such as we women have now and then. Why should you hold out against me? 'Tisn't like you. You see it was a bit of foolish pride on both sides; each of us thought the other in the wrong, and I thought it was Mattie's place to call upon

me first—she having nothing to do, and me being tied to my shop all day. For since our quarrel I've given over sitting to artists. I find it pays me as well to mind my shop, and it is not half so wearisome. Every day I've expected Mattie to call, and she hasn't. But illness makes us forget trifles; and directly the old gentleman brought me word that she was ill, and wanted to see me, I locked my door, rushed off, and here I am.'

Tom listened, seemingly unmoved, to all the young widow said. A slight muscular movement of his lip was all the evidence of his feeling as he heard his greatest fears confirmed. There was one consideration which alone lightened this calamity—Mattie's friend did not know of her deceit.

'I am only too glad to make up our friendship, Mr. Reynolds, and, indeed, so

must Mattie be, or she would not have sent for me.'

'She did not send for you.'

'But the old gentleman—'

'Is a liar. Perhaps made a fool of you purposely.'

'What! Is Mattie not ill?'

'No.'

'Where is she?'

'She—she has gone out—for—for me.'

CHAPTER VII.

Mrs. Eason left Tom Reynolds with a poor opinion of his magnanimity, his reticence seeming to her an obstinate determination to protract the quarrel. She regretted having made a peaceful overture, and vowed to serve Mattie no better than Tom had served her, should she seek a reconciliation. At the same time she was filled with apprehension that the old gentleman had been exercising a ruse to get her away from her shop whilst he broke her door and ran away with her till. It was well for Mr. Fox he kept out of her way.

Having watched her to Reynolds's apartment, he went to his underground room in Kingsland, content to let the stone he had

set in motion roll. He was anxious to begin the more important quest, and began at once to prepare for the journey to Italy, which he had resolved to begin on the next day.

Tom Reynolds did not move for some time after Kate Eason left him, and then wove his willows slowly and without thought of what his fingers did. Occasionally his hands rested, as if punctuating the thought flowing through his mind. It was not his own misfortune that concerned him. 'What must become of this little wife?' thought he. 'She is but wilful, I believe, and only for a time will she do that which her heart will tell her is wrong. Her heart is not at fault, 'tis but her eyes that are led away. She has wetted my parched eyes with her tears, and kissed those scarred cheeks of mine. Without a true heart she could not have nursed me tenderly when I was all

loathsome to the sight — she so young and fair. . . . She must not know that her secret is discovered, or her thoughtlessness would seem to her guilt, and remorse might lead her to a rash act, which could never be undone. . . . She cannot for long live with me deceiving me. I may not be able to conceal my knowledge from her. I cannot be gay with these thoughts upon me; yet if I would retain that love she has for me I should be cheery and pleasant. For she must surely love me less as I grow more dull and silent. Now that I am scarred and sightless there is naught to endear me to her but kindness, and such songs as I can sing. If my voice breaks down, and I am but a dreary, ugly, deformed companion, life with me must become burdensome to her. . . . Her disposition must incline her to a mate with responsive feelings, such as Mr. Biron has. Doubtless

it is my witless, dull company that has driven her to seek company more suitable. Mr. Hugh is bright and handsome, and happy and kind. Yet if she flies to him, poor thing, her happiness will be but short-lived, and her punishment far beyond her merit. Care will follow thoughtlessness; and when she thinks of me, alone and blind, and remembers how I lost my eyes for her sake, my sorrow will be more grievous to her than to me. . . . Perhaps she has no thought of leaving me; maybe she does not really love this young man. It is but a flirtation such as they engaged in before. Ah, that is a happy thought! . . . Maybe she sits merely as a matter of business to this artist, for the sake of providing means for our subsistence, and she conceals the fact, knowing how stupidly jealous I am. She thinks no harm surely. But though she has no feeling now, it may

grow by association day after day with Mr. Hugh. She is not old nor harsh nor dull, and he must appear ten times handsomer than he is by contrast with the husband left weaving baskets in this room. And he — how can he unmoved look upon Mattie's sweet face whole hours together? Oh, that I might see that face again but for one little minute! . . . He must needs love her, seeing her so much. . . . The temptation must be removed before they yield to it. How can *I* effect this—I, so helpless and so stupidly clumsy? It is such a thing as one ever so much more clever than I only might do. Who amongst my friends dare I trust with such a task? Who could separate them, and yet keep her ignorant of the cause? . . . I know no man who could help me; 'twould be like giving a watch to be repaired by a blacksmith; one clumsy touch would injure all

hopelessly. A woman could do it, if I knew of one. Who is there? Mrs. Eason? Oh, no, no. If Miss Biron were here, ah—'

In the midst of these reflections Mattie returned. He felt her kneeling presently at his feet, and fancied, with joy in his heart, that she was about to confess all to him. He put his hands upon her smooth hair, for her hat was cast aside, and so held her small head. She took his hand, and all the joy left his heart as he felt her putting shillings into it. And now she caught his head, and drew his face to her glowing cheek. How hot it was! He wondered if Hugh had seen her to the door, and if her cheeks had caught their glow in parting from him. The thought sickened him and banished hope.

'Aren't my cheeks hot?' she asked.

'Very.'

'I've been running.'

Was this also a lie?

'And here are eighteen shillings—there's a lot! Oh, what an awkward old boy you are! You have dropped them all.'

'Eighteen shillings for merely sitting before an artist for a few hours; 'tis as unlikely as that she should get so much for minding a shop,' thought Tom.

There was an under-current of thought running through Mattie's brain, which her manner and words did not betray. She chattered as she gathered up the scattered shillings, wondering the while whether it was their poverty or the loss of his sight which so affected Tom.

'Oh, how glad I am to-morrow is Sunday!' said she; 'we will go and sit in the Park if the day is as fine as this, and I will tell you all about the people who pass,

and whether the crocuses are out of the ground, and how they look; and we won't be separated for a single moment the whole day, will we, you dear, dear old Tom?'

'She does love me. No woman could lie like this,' thought Tom.

Mattie kissed him and went singing about her domestic work. Presently eyeing Tom narrowly, and detecting the effort with which he affected cheerfulness, she came to his side, resting her hands upon his shoulder.

'I don't think you are well,' said she seriously; 'you were not last night; this morning too you sung loud to deceive me, wishing me to believe you do not suffer. I do think it is the confinement. You shall go for a walk this very afternoon.'

'Nay, Mattie, my health is good.'

'But you will go out, for my sake. I

hate to be in this close room when the sun shines.'

'Why, to be sure, the room is close and dull too; though 'tis all the same to my eyes, and the smell of the osiers is unpleasant to many.'

'That's true, dear, they are enough to make any one ill; and you can afford to leave them a while now your little wife earns so much money. When you have finished that basket I will clear all the horrid stuff into the yard, and we will have no more of them until Monday.'

Tom finished his work, thinking how offensive the willow was, and how heavy and dull the room. No wonder a bright bird should seek to escape from such a cage and a mate so miserable.

He saw no way of overcoming, unaided, the difficulties by which he was beset; and René Biron was the only person he could

trust. If he alone had been concerned, he would have died rather than reveal his wife's secret to a living soul; but Mattie's happiness was at stake, and he resolved to use the only means he knew of for insuring her welfare. Where René was he could learn only from Mr. Gray, her solicitor, and to his office in Lincoln's Inn he desired Mattie to conduct him. Tom had invested all his savings in stock, which he added to that with which René had planted the nursery. When the house was burnt, and Tom by losing his sight was unable to carry on the business, the stock was sold off, and from the money realised he was enabled to discharge the expenses of his illness, and yet had sufficient left to pay the rent due. This gave him a pretext for his visit to René's lawyer. When Mattie had led him into the office, and withdrawn, he begged of Mr. Gray to tell him where

he might find Miss Biron, but would not be drawn by offers of assistance into betraying the object he had in view. Mr. Gray was willing to do anything but what Tom wanted; but he promised to write at once to Miss Biron.

'It is only a matter of a few days' delay,' he said. 'The letter, stating your desire to see Miss Biron, will be in her hands in two days' time, and Miss Biron's answer shall be communicated to you without delay.'

The rest of that day and the whole of the following should have been a time of happiness to the blind man—would have been but for the tormenting doubts that forced themselves into his mind. All that a woman in her sweetest tenderest mood can do Mattie did to lighten her husband's heart; but every effort to minister to the mind diseased

served but to increase the ill. That one so young and gay could in truth feel for him, so ugly and aged with care, the devoted love Mattie's every action and word professed seemed to him impossible, and he could put but one construction on her behaviour. Why, when he was handsome and hale she had shown less delight in him than now, when there was so little to admire. Yes, she was over-acting the part she felt called upon to play, and simulated affection to conceal its absence. Mr. Fox's most effectual hit was in making Tom believe himself disfigured. He could not avoid the conclusion that Mattie, who had shown at all times such susceptibility to the influence of her senses, must be disappointed in possessing for a husband one so utterly unattractive. He was quite deceived; he had not the slightest doubt that all Mr. Fox had said about him was truth;

and his surprise was that he had been cheated into believing his appearance unaltered by the accident which had deprived him of sight. Convincing proofs met him everywhere, now he was awakened to receive them.

They walked into the Park on Sunday.

Uneducated folks may have very good feelings, but they have a bad method of showing them. They have no idea how their kindness pains. And now Tom's heart was so sensitively strung that every breath drew from it a mournful note. Mattie left his side in the Park to strike up an acquaintance with a pretty child playing near, and a woman on Tom's other side felt it incumbent upon her to be civil.

'A dreadful affliction, yours,' said she.

Tom nodded.

'The young woman is your sister, I suppose?'

'No, mum; she's my wife.'

'Your wife, eh? Tut, tut! Poor thing! Of course she married you before you was struck.'

'Of coorse.'

'Oh, dear, dear! Well, marriage is a lottery; but as I always says, we're afflicted in this manner for some wise purpose, no doubt. That's a comfort, ain't it?'

By this time Mattie, having kissed the child a couple of dozen times, brought it to Tom, thinking the prattle which delighted her woman's ear would please his; but the child, seeing Tom's closed eyes, was struck with a child's horror of the exceptional; and classing a blind man with a policeman, a chimney-sweeper, and the undefined bogey, set up a shriek and ran away screaming.

'You frightened him,' exclaimed the well-disposed woman.

'No wonder,' murmured Tom, hanging his head.

As they walked home, husband and wife, Mattie bought a bunch of violets.

'I will wear them in my frock,' said she when they reached home. 'And now, when you want to smell them, you must kiss me.'

He kissed her, wondering if she closed her eyes as she saw his scarred and eyeless face approaching.

She did all she could to divert his mind from brooding. She read to him—hard task at most times—and sang old hymns, and filled up the intervals with cheerful talk; but to no purpose. Each saw that the other was simulating. After a while she ceased to speak, and both sat silent—he by the hearth-side, with his hands folded on his knee, and head bent. She regarded him for a time with tears spring-

ing in her eyes; then rose, blew out the lamp, and, drawing his arm around her neck, sat on his knee and nestled her head in his shoulder.

'You have blown out the light, Mattie?'

'Yes; I like the glow of the fire. 'Tis so cosy and sleepy and quiet.'

Tom, thinking of his looks, wondered if that was her sole reason for extinguishing the light, and was silent.

'Tom dear, you must not think me unfeeling because I chat and laugh now just as I used in old times. Indeed I am troubled and grieved, for I see how deeply you take your misfortune to heart, and I can find no way of relieving you. My eyes are yours; is there anything you would like to see that I have not told you about?'

'You haven't told me about yourself, Mattie.'

'Why, I am not altered, dear. See with your fingers. There!' She passed his hand over her smooth hair and to her brow.

'She purposely mistakes my meaning,' thought Tom; but at that moment his fingers, tracing the outline of her pretty features, felt the cheek wet which they touched. In an instant he was altered.

'O my dear love!' he cried, pressing her passionately to his breast. And she, shedding her tears quietly there, and he clasping her thus, were happy for a time.

He was not the first man who has denied reason for a woman's tears, and willingly accepted whatever mad hypothesis his heated brain suggested in explanation of his doubts and misgivings. When the brain was cool, and Mattie gone the next morning, suspicion and fear returned. He could find no argument to make him

believe her parting words, 'Now I will go and mind shop;' nor could he see in the gaiety with which she spoke aught of dissimulation.

CHAPTER VIII.

M. DE GAILLEFONTAINE was *très, très, très fâché!*

A simple accident which no one would have foreseen had in one moment turned the current of René's life from the channel so skilfully prepared for it, and there was uncertainty as to whether it could be turned again to its original course, or would be absorbed in its meandering, leaving the field he wished it to irrigate barren and unfruitful. *Mon Dieu*, it was execrable!

René had graciously forgiven him before her departure, but had declined to accept his escort. She professed not to know how long she should stay in London,

nor where. In truth she had no definite plan beyond that of going at once to her 'woman's work.' She was unusually silent, for she had now a theme to occupy her mind.

With the suspicion that haunts the guilty mind, De Gaillefontaine conceived that René was studiously reticent, and that she purposely concealed from him intentions fully determined. He could not disguise the trouble which disturbed his mind perpetually. They were actors to whom he acted.

'What grieves my marquis?' asked Giovanna Raffiolli.

'Is it not sufficient cause that our queen is not here?'

'Of course we are all distracted upon her account; but tell me, do we not grieve more for ourselves? What affects you? Would you keep secrets from me?'

'None that would please you to hear. I am racked with apprehensions. That René—'

'Sit here; no one shall hear you.'

'A moment since she was in my hand, and now I do not know even where she is. I am in dread of what may happen. There is nothing certain. She may return here no more. We may never see her again, and all our hopes are ruined. She may become a nurse in a hospital; she may go into a convent.'

'But you tell me she is quite good.'

'Quite.'

'Ah, then, she will not go into a religious house yet awhile, rest assured. She is a woman.'

'But she is English.'

'Name of God, what a nation it is!'

'I cannot say that to-morrow I shall be what I was yesterday.'

'But you will be no less than you are to-day, eh?'

'Is it enough to say to a man, "You are half way up the ladder; stop there"?'

'Be comforted, my little infant; all will come right. This René is an infant. This waywardness, it is an infant's. Presently you shall guide her again.'

'It is that which I doubt. She is enraged with me for the first time in her life.'

'That too is the anger of an infant; it will be gone at once. She will forget like an infant.'

'Why does she leave me here? She refuses to let me accompany her. She commands me to stay. Regard, it is as if she said, "Antoine, you are my servant. Do as I bid you do. I am your employer." The devil, I am vexed!'

M. de Gaillefontaine did not know René; such a man, were he to live till the end of

time, could not understand her. He gave her credit only for such sentiments as he experienced, and ignored the presence of those he had never felt. To other superficial observers it would seem extravagant that a young lady of fortune and position should interest herself so keenly in the fortunes of a simple dependent; but regarding René without reference to her accidental accessories, and seen simply as a tender-hearted impulsive girl, eager with undefined yet noble aspirations, the inconsistency disappears. Untrammelled by considerations of society's opinion, or the influence of friends, René did at once the thing which appeared to her right. She sought to be of use in the world, and sought sincerely; had she disregarded the voice that called now for help she would have been not sincere—not René Biron, a heroine, but a girl of ordinary mould.

From her hotel in London she went

first to Lincoln's Inn, and thence with Mr. Gray to Tom Reynolds. It was midday, and they found him alone, standing beside his basket-work. For he had risen at the sound of their footsteps upon the stairs with an instinctive knowledge that she, whose visit he now desired and feared, had come. René detected his agitation, and observed that his hands trembled, though he held one within the other tightly. He looked ill and pale. There were care and anxiety in his face; the muscles of his mouth expressed what his eyes could not betray. René saw him through compassionate tears, and looking at this blind bent man, she thought of the type of manly perfection and full happiness she had seen him but a few months before.

'You find me greatly altered,' he said timidly, almost as if he had a forlorn hope that the change was not noticeable.

'Of course you are different to my eyes,' said René lightly, 'and to me the change is not for the better. But I am not your wife, you know. Had I been rescued, then everything that marked your devotion for me would be a charm tenfold greater than any you had lost. And where is Mattie?'

René's eyes were fixed upon the face before her; and no sooner were her words spoken than she saw his trouble, and wished them unsaid.

'She has gone away for an hour or so,' answered Tom quietly.

'That is capital,' said René, 'for I want to talk with you alone. Can you make it convenient to call for me in half an hour, Mr. Gray?'

Mr. Gray could do anything to oblige so rare a combination as a beautiful girl and an excellent client, and withdrew at once.

Tom's lingering hope in Mattie's fidelity made him repent at this moment that René had answered his cry for help. He knew that she had come from Italy to assist him, and now he would have sent her back with her purpose unfulfilled if she would have gone.

'And how is Mattie?' asked René.

'Very well, miss. She bëars up wonderful well considering what she has to put up with.'

'Why, what trouble has she?'

'Well, you see, miss, the room is dull, they tell me, and small, and these willows smell vasty unpleasant to one who's been used to the fresh air and the parlour of the Ferry-bŏat. You doan't know haow refreshing that parlour used to smell when the gents had got hot grogs abaout, and cigars and pipes a-smoking away.'

'Are these her only troubles?'

'Ah, no, miss; there's a trouble comes afore all they—and that's me.'

'You!'

'Yes, me, miss. 'Tain't only my good looks I've lost—and they're wonderful pleasing to females, good looks are; and it ain't astonishin' nuther, seeing haow men, as is supposed to be the stronger vessels according to Scripture, is altogether fetched by 'em. I daresay, miss, you've found a many men as would have you for your beauty alone. For I don't deny, miss, that you're good-looking.'

'Thank you, Reynolds. And what else have you lost besides good looks?'

'I've lost my life and spirit, miss. Lord, I no more whistle now nor a horse; and females deu like a man that's cheery and can whistle well. Surprising how fond females are of a man that can whistle. I daresay you like to hear a man whistle?'

'Ye-es.'

'You see I'm not cheerful, nor happy,' he gulped over the words—'nor happy as I was. This coming upon me so suddent makes me feel as thaough I'd been asleep a score of years, and woke up an old man. Then Mattie, she be such a child. 'Twars my fault to insist upon marrying her, whether she would or not. I sheuld ha' waited until her mind was more settled and firmer. If she had been a widder, now, or if so be she had been old and ugly, and so out of the way of temptation, why, then she'd have been a proper match for me, and there would have been such a marriage as is made in Heaven.'

René did not speak. There was no need to ask questions; the whole story was coming out easily enough. She held a fold of her dress between her finger and thumb, and she pinched it until she hurt herself as

she thought of the woman who gave pain to the big-hearted generous man before her.

'I be such a fool, that's truth, that I go and don't do the very thing I didn't ought not to do. When a man sees that his wife don't care for him so much as he would have her deu, he ought to take measures for to make her love him, not sit stupid and miserable. Crying your eyes out because you're poor don't make you richer. It's only natral a female should like the best male she can see, and the male that makes hisself most pleasant. An ordinary man, if he saw his child-wife listening to a younger, handsomer, cleverer man than himself, would set about to make himself agreeable to his wife in other ways, wouldn't he, miss?'

'I don't know,' said René truthfully.

Tom paused a while.

'Oh, I am so helpless!' he said suddenly, covering his face with his hands.

'That is why I have come to help you,' said René, going to his side and laying her little hand on his arm.

He rocked himself, struggling to check a display of his emotion.

'Your wife has not left you?' said René softly.

'Oh, no, no, no! What have I said? I have thought of something else, and forgotten her. She is good to me and tries to make me think happily. She's sorry for what she—for what I can't conceal. The other night I went to touch her cheek—it is the only way I can know her beauty now—and it was wet with tears. But she went away from me the next morning, and yesterday and to-day.'

'Where has she gone?'

'To—to—your cousin, Master Hugh.'

'Hugh Biron?'

'Yes; but it is only that man Fox who says so,' said Tom rapidly. 'He is a bad man, and would tell a lie willingly.'

'Does Mattie deny it?'

'I have not told her. It seemed cruel to even think it true until it was proved. She says she goes to mind the shop of a friend—' He stopped abruptly.

'And the friend?'

'Denies it; but Mattie does not know. She brings me money—I have not touched a farthing of it; it lies up there in a corner, covered with that weighty bundle of osiers.'

'Possibly she gets it by some hard duty which she thinks you might be pained to know; and Fox, who never liked you, uses his knowledge of her secrecy to give you unhappiness.'

'Maybe so, miss,' said Tom, with little hope in his voice. 'I've tried to think that

and a thaousand other things to excuse her. But they won't take root. These new ideas fade away one after the other, and only the old one graows and strengthens. I have looked at this trouble in all ways, and find it less grievous to believe what I have heard and hope than to disbelieve it and fear. But 'tisn't what's gone that troubles me, miss. I would never have an unhappy thought of that if I could think hopefully of the time to come. She is too good to do wrong and be happy. She must suffer when she finds out her true position.'

'She shall if I show her,' thought René; but she said, with a voice as tender as a dove's,

'The poor child requires tender guidance.'

Tom assented eagerly. It was what had been in his mind.

'A gentle hand to lead her,' suggested René, involuntarily swinging her arm as though she held a riding-whip.

'My very thought, miss! It isn't in the power of a man, rough and rude by natur, to venture upon such delicate work. I should but kill the thing I wish to cherish. But if you—'

'It is as you say a delicate work, and requires a tender hand, and truly a woman is best able to do a thing of this kind. You are quite wise too with regard to the past. We will believe that at the worst she has been actuated by a girlish infatuation. That is to be overcome, and will be forgotten almost as soon as it is forgiven. And now let us see how we are to bring this unhappy little woman back to happiness, and how we may prevent the recurrence of such an unfortunate event as we, for the sake of argument, will suppose to have taken place;

for your wife is young, and pretty and attractive in her way.'

Tom nodded; his face was lit with cheerful thought, and he listened eagerly.

'She should not leave you. It is unfair to her that she should be exposed to temptation. You must keep her at home.'

'It is unfair to put her in the way of temptation; yet it seems unnatral and wrong that she, so fond of light and gaiety, should be confined to a dull room and baound to a melancholy man. It is like making her a partner in my blindness.'

René could tolerate this 'derangement of ideas' no longer. She started to her feet in a pet.

'She wants nothing better if she is good. Her husband and her home are good enough for her. I am getting quite angry with you. You think a woman has nothing to do but to dance and sing, if she is young

and pretty. Nonsense! she has duties, as you men have, and is truly happier for the tears she sheds. If you make your wife believe what you try to make me think, I should not be surprised at the result you fear.'

'Tell me what I shall do.'

'Work together. Why doesn't she make baskets?'

'It is rough and unpleasant, and the smell—'

'Rubbish! These withies smell ten thousand times sweeter than nasty black beer and old pipes—ugh! You must work together; yes, that is it. You shall have a shop, and sell these baskets that you make. Mattie can serve the customers and arrange the shop whilst you work close at hand. There will be pleasant employment for her. I would like the occupation myself. But you must take her away at once

from her present engagement, whatever it is. If you tell her you would rather have her beside you, it should be enough to keep her there.'

'But if—if Master Hugh really has—has—'

'Renewed his acquaintance? It is possible.'

'And loves Mattie as he loved her before, he will surely follow her.'

'No, he won't,' said René resolutely. 'If you will take care of your wife, I will take care of my cousin.'

She was unusually excited, and impatient to set the machinery in motion for the good work her mind already saw completed.

When Mr. Gray returned she attacked him at once.

'I want a basket-shop,' she said.

'Certainly,' said Mr. Gray, with as much composure as if it were a matter of every-day occurrence to have basket-shops demanded of him by beautiful young clients.

'You can get me one?'

'Of course it is to be had.'

'When?'

'There will be no difficulty in getting one in a few weeks or a—'

'Weeks! I want one this afternoon.'

This knocked even the imperturbable off his legs. His chin fell, and his whole face was a note of exclamation.

'This afternoon—to-morrow at latest,' continued René. 'If I wanted one next year I should tell you next year. What *is* the use of delay? When you have settled what you want, why should you hesitate to obtain it? I know nothing of business, but it seems to me that I have

seen something like advertisements in newspapers.'

'Oh, it is quite possible to execute your wish.'

'Then oblige me by executing it.'

René looked as if she were surprised that he did not immediately fly off for a basket-shop, and he was more nervous under this treatment than he had ever felt before.

'You can take the cab. I will find my way to the hotel: there you will find me. I shall be anxious until I hear of your success. I will look at the newspapers myself; I might be able to assist you. That will expedite matters,' she said to Tom, as Mr. Gray left. 'Now I daresay we shall be able to get what we want in a week. If I had left it to him we might have waited whilst he wrote three hundred and sixty-five expensive letters.'

Tom was frightened by René's rapidity, fearing that Mattie would be alarmed by the sudden control put upon her. Seeing this, René subdued her spirit, and spoke calmly of the advantages that must attend her project. Whilst she was speaking Tom raised his finger, listening.

'It is her step,' he said.

Mattie entered the room quickly, and stopped for a moment, surprised to see René; but her surprise did not prevent her going to her husband, kissing him, and asking affectionately if he were better.

'Either he is mistaken altogether, or she is a deeper hypocrite than even I imagined,' thought René.

She was yet more perplexed by the delight Mattie evinced as she heard of René's proposal.

'Then I sha'n't have to leave you a

little bit, dear Tom,' said she; 'and we will arrange some part of the shop for you to make your baskets in, so that whilst we do our work we may talk to each other. I do really think it is through having no one here of a morning to talk to that you have lost heart lately. I do wish I knew how to thank you fitly, Miss Biron, for giving me this happiness.'

'It is a speculation of mine, Mattie, and if it succeeds I shall be sufficiently paid without thanks.'

Mattie coloured high and dropped her eyes under the steadfast searching gaze of René's. Few would not quail who thought one trying to read their inner secrets in that way. René could read little that was certain in Mattie's face, for truth and deception were mingled there; but it seemed to her that truth preponderated, and she began to regard Tom as the victim of his

own credulity. She wished to verify her opinion, and presently she said,

'I have desired my agent to procure this shop at once; he may have taken it already, for my orders were to do so immediately. So it will be well for you to prepare everything for removal. Of course you will be unable to return to your occupation.'

'No, no,' said Mattie, looking perplexed; and continued, 'I must go and explain that to my employer.'

'Yes, Mattie, that must be done at once,' said René; and then looking full into the wife's face, she added, '*and I will go with you.*'

CHAPTER IX.

Followed by René, Mattie descended to the street, bewildered by apprehension, and unable to avert the disclosure of her secret. She felt sick and giddy, and held the door for support.

René looked into her ashen face, and asked remorselessly,

'Which way shall we go?'

Mattie caught her hand, and by a gesture implored silence, looking up the stairs as fearful of her husband overhearing.

René stopped a cab that was passing; and when they were seated, and the cabman was waiting for instructions, she once more asked,

'Where are we to go?'

'Anywhere,' Mattie whispered, her whole frame quivering with emotion.

'The Russell Hotel,' said René.

The cabman looked from the girl on the front seat, cowering and nerveless, to her on the back, erect, glittering like a beautiful pythoness waiting to strike, and mounted his box with just so little of pity for the weak as to feel that he 'would not be in her shoes for an annooity.'

Neither spoke until they were in René's apartment at the hotel; then René said,

'This agitation means that you have deceived your husband, I suppose?'

'Yes,' answered Mattie faintly, bowing her head.

'There is only one sin you could be tempted to commit, only one crime that a husband cannot forgive.'

'Crime!' exclaimed the wife.

'Under the pretence of minding a shop

for a friend you have gone day after day to whom?'

'To—to Mr. Biron.'

'Your former lover—the man for whom you jilted Tom Reynolds before he was your husband.'

Mattie strained her twined fingers and was speechless.

'Does this young man know you are married, or have you deceived him as well as your husband?'

'He knows that I am married.'

'Then his principles are not greatly in advance of yours. And when do you propose leaving your husband?'

Mattie looked at her interrogator in dumb bewilderment.

'I ask, when do you intend forsaking your husband entirely?'

'I do not mean to leave him.'

'Mr. Biron has not asked you to do so?'

'Never!' said Mattie eagerly.

'That is a sufficiently good reason for not leaving your husband, isn't it? Besides, it must be pleasant to you to have the love of an honest man as well as a puppy's; and I daresay it flatters your vanity to see how much a good heart can suffer for you.'

'Who suffers for me?'

'Your husband. You are not such a fool but that you can see by his unhappiness that he detects the falling off in your love. You could not, if you wished, hide from that loving soul your alienation. O you wicked, wicked little idiot! To think that you should come from that man who is no better than yourself—who liked you for a month, forgot you in a week—and dare to caress the great-souled husband you are wronging! Do you ever think where, but for your husband, you would be now?

Have you ever felt regret for the pain he endured in saving your body from the flames? Do you ever feel how much he lost, and how little he gained, by his love for you?'

'Oh, yes, yes! My God, what have I done? No wrong wilfully. I love none but my dear, dear husband.'

'Was it your love for him that made you do a thing which you know would give him pain to discover?'

'Yes,' answered Mattie boldly. 'Do you think I would risk giving him pain but that I thought to make him happy?'

René laughed; but Mattie continued earnestly,

'He was troubled because he could not earn sufficient to pay for our support; and when this engagement was offered me, I saw no harm in accepting it, knowing that I loved only my husband.'

'Did you feel you were doing no wrong in concealing this from your husband?'

Mattie did not answer.

'You felt that even he, so generous and trusting, could not believe in the purity of your intentions?'

'That is what I felt.'

'Then how do you expect to persuade me?'

'I do not wish to persuade you. I care not what all the world thinks, so that my poor husband shall not think ill of me.'

'In other words, you do not wish to be sent back to your father, or cast upon the charity of Mr. Biron; and you would like to stay with your husband, he being kinder than others to you.'

Mattie was too numbed to feel the whip. She bent her head silently. Thinking her indifference mere callousness, René whipped harder. She was prejudiced and unjust. She had prepared herself to find

deceit, and saw nothing else. The purest flower may be trodden under foot for a vile weed if our sight be short, and we start with the belief that the clay can bear no sweet thing. René lost her judgment, together with the control of her temper; and feminine spite getting the better of her, she knew no mercy until she was exhausted. Then she said, in calmer accents,

'Tell me what has taken place between you and my cousin.'

'I have sat before him in different costumes, for which he has paid me.'

'Is that all?'

Mattie looked at René and was unable to speak. Her lips moved; and then, covering her face with her hands, she began to cry plaintively.

'To think that you, who are so kind, should think so ill of me! Oh, how shall I bear it if my husband takes your bitter

thoughts into his heart!' she sobbed; and then, suddenly throwing herself upon her knees, she cried passionately, 'Oh, scold me, beat me, punish me how you will, for I have been a wicked cruel girl; but spare my poor husband. It is not for myself I cry. I will not say a word to shield myself, though your cruel suspicions tear my heart. Oh, I will do anything you ask me if only you will keep my secret, and tell my husband nothing of your opinions. You do not know how he loves me.'

'I do.'

'Then you will think how he would suffer if he believed me a worthless girl. If he only suspects that my love has lessened, his unhappiness will soon be removed. He shall see how truly I love him. I will never leave his side. God knows it was no light desire that took me away. I did all for the best.'

'Badly.'

'I have been a silly girl.'

'Silliness is wickedness when it trifles with hearts. You have been silly before; you cried and repented, and were forgiven. The same things are repeating now, and may be repeated again, if you think forgiveness is as easily to be obtained. What assurance can you give that these protestations will not be forgotten, that you will not again stoop to folly?'

'I will do nothing I dare not tell my husband. I can promise no more; but you shall see that I am a good wife, and that you have been unjust in your suspicions.'

'Ah, well, I shall be glad to find I owe you an apology. Now return to your husband—tell him you have terminated your engagement: he will ask no questions.'

'But,' Mattie hesitated, 'if I do not tell Mr. Biron he may seek me at my home.'

Suspicion flashed in René's eyes again.

'Tell me where he lives,' she said.

'30 Charlroy Street.'

'What time do you get there?'

'Eleven o'clock.'

'And how long do you sit in one position?'

'Two hours.'

'(Two hours! *Mon Dieu!*) I will tell my cousin what has happened. You may go.'

Later in the day an embassy came from Lincoln's Inn with a list of basket-shops.

'I want these people—Reynolds and his wife—to feel independent in this business, and free from obligation,' René explained. 'I would like them rather to think that I am making a profit at their expense. Now how will you do that?'

'By making them pay a heavy per-

centage for money advanced without security. Of course the shop must be stocked.'

'Yes. But you must fix the percentage at such a rate that they can pay it by doing a reasonable amount of work.'

'Certainly.'

'And if you find that the business is not sufficient to meet the requirements, it must be increased in a fictitious way. Some one must be paid to buy baskets of them without letting them know for what purpose.'

'I understand your meaning.'

'Now take this list to them, and let them choose which they like. You will tell them the condition upon which I advance money, but in such a manner that they shall not be frightened into rejecting the proposal.'

The man of business recapitulated René's

commands, took up his hat, made his *congé*, and withdrew.

After dinner René reviewed her wardrobe. She had brought but few dresses with her, and they were plain. At all times the simplicity of her toilette was an affectation in the regard of those who knew her wealth less than her artistic taste. In reality this simplicity was the result of a nice appreciation of her own beauty. Her dress was a compliment to Nature and herself. The closely-fitting soft material followed the beautiful lines of her pliant figure, and the graceful curves were unbroken by artificial contrivances. She would not suffer ornament to detract from the grace of her person; it was only permitted where it harmonised, or suggested by contrast.

She laid out the costume most suitable to her purpose, and then turned to her bon-

nets. Those elaborate constructions betrayed the position of the possessor. She shook her head at them. 'Even a man might see how much they cost,' said she. She took her maid and walked through the streets, until she arrived at a milliner's shop, with a hat in the window marked 'Five-and-six-pence.' The tall young lady, with her maid following humbly in the wake, sailed into the shop like a queen, passed the row of customers waiting humbly upon chairs to be served, and addressed herself to the commercial monarch, who, in an easy attitude of complacent superiority, was surveying his possessions.

'I want the bonnet in your window marked five-and-sixpence.'

'Certainly, madame, certainly. Take a chair, madame.'

The man had never seen such a bonnet as René's in his shop before. He had not

served a customer, it was his boast, for three years; but he rushed off at once to do the bidding of such a customer wearing such a bonnet.

'This is the article, madame,' said he; 'but allow me to observe that we have others more suitable, madame.'

'Do you *think* so?' said René, with a smile that closed the argument.

Her maid took the bonnet, and René having paid her money inclined her head, and left the shop as superbly as she entered it. No one else could have got served in the time; no one else could have been served by the principal of that establishment; no one else would have been allowed to take that bonnet away for five-and-sixpence. And all this she effected by her imperial presence and her beauty, which she knew and made others recognise.

The following morning she left her hotel

in the five-and-sixpenny trophy and the dress she had set aside for this purpose, wearing above it a waterproof cloak that buttoned to her feet. The morning was fresh and fine; she walked briskly, enjoying the exercise and the enterprise before her. Amongst the crowd hurrying to their work, this lithe tall girl moving as though she walked upon waves, looking in the face like a delicately carved marble flushed with warm blood that mantled in her cheek, animated by divine passions that glittered in her eyes, was one not to be unnoticed. Young men and old men of fifty turned to look after her with admiration.

In Charlroy Street she knocked at No. 30, and asking for Mr. Hugh Biron was begged to walk up-stairs to his studio.

CHAPTER X.

'Come in, Mattie, come in,' cried Hugh, hearing a tap at the door, 'and look alive. I'm in a tangle with this easel. Catch hold of a corner of this canvas, there's a good child, or I shall drop it.' His back was to the door.

René went to his side, and took a corner of the picture. Hugh at once saw the delicate white fingers, looked up, caught sight of the beautiful profile, and let go. Easel and picture fell with a crash, and the cousins looked at each other over the ruins. The oddity of the situation made them laugh. When René smiled her eyes made the heart bound.

Hugh stammered out apologies, and

begged to know whom he had the pleasure of calling to assist in the downfall of art.

'I am Mattie Reynolds's friend.'

'Kate Eason?'

'Kate Eason,' answered René, grateful for the suggestion, she having neglected to prepare a name for herself.

'When I saw your hand I thought you a lady come to give me a commission.'

'Instead of that I am a poor model come to beg for an engagement.'

'Do you want to make me a bankrupt at once? Do you think I can support all the pretty models in London?'

René looked archly at the young man, and assuming a sly drawl, said,

'Mattie can't come here again.'

'How so?'

'Her husband's found her out.' René smiled again with a little roguishness in her eye; under which witchery Hugh could

but smile in return. 'And so she sent me to take her place.' As she said this René quietly took off her hat. Her black hair was gathered close to her small head; yet its natural curl asserted itself in waves that, catching the light, shone with a golden redness, whilst over her creamy brow a few stray hairs had broken from restraint, and combined in vagrant curls.

Hugh looked at her in silent amazement, to which her cool audacity contributed but slightly. He had only imagined, never seen, such a face and head as now he saw.

With easy assurance René removed her waterproof, laid it beside her bonnet, and then turning about with her hands behind her, said quietly, with her assumed drawl,

'Do you think I shall do?'

'Don't move!' cried Hugh, disregarding her question. 'Yet move again, for

each fresh pose seems finer than the last.' He paused in admiration for some minutes, and then said,

'You must think me a green young artist to be so affected by the appearance of a model, but on my soul I never beheld such a lovely face and figure before. If I can with any faithfulness get you upon canvas, my fortune's made.'

'How will you represent me?'

'As you are, and call the portrait an Ideal.'

René instinctively curtsied.

'Where did you learn that curtsy?'

'My father was a dancing-master.'

'How is it I have heard of you so little? You are a model for artists to rave about.'

'I only sit to oblige people—to you to oblige Mattie.'

'And so her husband has discovered it all?'

A smile and a drawling 'Ye-es.'

'Poor child!'

'These married men are so selfish, they would monopolise all a woman's affection if they could.'

'From some lips that would pass for satire.'

'What is satire?' René looked vaguely with her large eyes.

'Something that pretty girls should not possess.'

'You mean wisdom, or virtue, or something.'

'Something. Mattie said you were pretty, but that's all.'

'You must be wanting in something, to think a woman would tell the man she loves of a girl prettier than herself.'

'Does Mattie love me?'

'Do you love Mattie?'

Hugh laughed heartily.

'You have known me for some ten minutes or so, and you are trying to worm out my most secret thoughts.'

'It is a secret, then,' thought René; and she said, 'And you have known me for about the same time, and want me to reveal some one else's secret. Don't you think we had better mind our own business and begin at once?'

'We are fulfilling our different occupations. My eyes are not idle, and you are unconsciously yielding material for my work. I am not a photographer. I can't and don't wish to screw your pretty head to a rest, and in a moment transfer a set expression to a plate. I must try to get into my portrait a combination of all I see, that each time one looks at the painting there may appear a new grace there.'

'You should have that written upon your door as a notice to models; it would

save you the trouble of explaining your views to each new sitter.'

'This young woman wants a little of the conceit taken out of her. I must drop her down,' thought Hugh, fishing in his pocket for a pipe. 'Such a notice,' he said, 'might be useful with amateurs, but would be unnecessary with professional models. They, as a rule, poor things, have no faces worth studying, and know their business too well to require apology from their employers.'

'And you think me an amateur?'

'I am sure of it. I don't dispute that you have sat before. Are you in the ballet?'

'Not yet.'

'Many models are. Were you of them you would know that an artist regards beauty with a different eye from that of the man who lounges into a stall to see a spectacle. Artists don't fall in love with their

models as a rule—least of all in the way the lounger regards the posturante. Your error is one which vulgar people make who cannot give artists credit for greater delicacy than their own.'

'I suppose an artist has very fine feelings,' said René, looking at the pipe Hugh was preparing, but with such an absence of expression in her voice and face that he was thoroughly perplexed, not knowing whether to believe her too clever or merely stupid.

He lit his pipe carelessly, and going to his easel, prepared materials for making a sketch in black-and-white. René seated herself, and in her turn regarded Hugh with a critical glance. Before she saw him she disliked him, and now found nothing to remove her prejudice. Had he been robust, and overflowing with gaiety and animal spirits, she could have thought his flirtation

with Mattie the result of thoughtlessness; but his aspect was not at all suggestive of a light-hearted careless disposition. Had he been perfectly handsome, she could partly have forgiven Mattie—him too, perhaps. It is far easier to forgive a beautiful sinner than a commonplace one. She had seen many men more handsome than Hugh. He was thin and over-tall; his hair was fair, and that upon his face was trimmed in the Vandyke style, and displeased René. His nose was straight, to be sure; but his eyes were the only feature to be admired. They were deep set, soft, and dark; when at rest their expression was one of melancholy, tenderness, and sleepy kindliness; but his varying thoughts shone through them when he spoke.

'Those eyes would make any foolish girl think he loved her—rightly enough, for this is just the man to be sentimental over

every pretty face,' thought René; 'a man more dangerous than a professed rake, for he will fall in love believing, and making others believe, that it is nothing but æsthetic admiration, until one or two hearts are broken. Then he glooms a while in Werterean style until he finds another face to minister to those delicate feelings for which the vulgar cannot give him credit. He is not a whit less sensual than other men whose indulgence he can't excuse. His regard for Mattie was purely æsthetic, doubtless, and his delicacy excused him from considering anything but his own pleasure. He doesn't think of her husband's, nor even of her future happiness. Of course he sat before her vapouring about her beauty and his ideal until he found he couldn't get on without a pipe; and she, poor fool, thinks he is breaking his heart for her, and is ready to break hers for him; and when they

meet again, the same maudlin farce will be reacted—unless I make them realise their true position.'

'Did Mrs. Reynolds send any message to me?' asked Hugh.

'She hopes you will not call upon her until this little unpleasantness has blown over.'

'Of course I shall not.'

'It wouldn't be safe, would it?'

'How do you mean?'

'Mr. Reynolds is such a powerful man, though he is blind.'

Hugh flushed his eyes, and looked up with quick distrust; but he saw mild stupidity and nothing more in the calm large eyes that met his.

'I have nothing to fear from him,' he said; 'Mattie can explain everything to him in five minutes.'

'And he will see nothing wrong in her visiting you?'

'Oh, dear, no!' replied Hugh, with a little hesitation.

'Is he an artist?'

'Why do you ask?'

'I thought he must be, to look at the affair in such a sensible manner.'

The veil was too thin to conceal her meaning. Hugh saw that the beautiful creature before him was not a fool, and the sharp cuts she had dealt were not accidental. She was clever, and a moralist. Probably she had come expressly to reprove him for the course he had taken, which she considered wrong. Recognising this, he perceived at once the view this young woman took of the case, and knowing her construction to be entirely a wrong one, he was annoyed. To enter upon a justification of his motives would be an acknowledgment to her of her right to question them; to let her see his annoyance would cause her to

believe her insinuations justified. He quietly finished his preparations without speaking or looking away from the business, and in that time recovered composure.

'What does it matter what this girl or all the world chooses to think?' thought he. 'I know my motives were as pure as my conduct.'

His annoyance gave place to amusement, as he regarded himself, a man, being taken to task by his model—a mere girl, a precocious child, who six years ago maybe lectured a doll. So when he at length looked again into her face it was with a smile.

René was seated in an attitude of easy repose; in its softness and grace her form expressed voluptuous languor, but active beauty sparkled in her eyes—such as is seen in those of a swordsman who looks in his adversary's face for the thrust to parry, or the advantage to be taken. She was no

child Hugh looked at. Minerva never looked less childish. This was a woman with a fixed purpose. The mere earning of a few shillings, even a vain girl's desire to create admiration, could not have lent the deep significance of her gaze; yet to what purpose it was due Hugh could not then imagine.

'If she intends to punish me with her woman's weapons for my supposed misdeeds, why doesn't she open out fire, and have it over? It is not usual for women to delay execution.'

René had been betrayed by her feelings into saying more than she intended; and now she was surprised, at a moment when the busy occupation of her mind with the task before her caused her to forget the part she had to sustain. Hugh's speculative expression recalled her to her position. Her eyes, as Hugh looked into them, melted

into a kind sly smile, and she said, with her affected drawl,

'Well, do you like me better than Mrs. Reynolds?'

Once more Hugh was plunged into perplexity and doubt. He saw now only a beautiful creature, with something rather wicked than noble in her expression, and he considered that, after all, if her sarcasms were intended, they might have been prompted only by the jealousy that one pretty woman feels for another. That flash of quick intelligence in her eyes might have been purely accidental.

As he did not again refer to Mrs. Reynolds, René was silent on the subject. She spoke scarcely a dozen words during the remainder of the sitting.

'May I come to-morrow morning?' she asked, looking sidelong as Hugh held the door.

'Eleven o'clock,' said Hugh, in the most business-like manner; but when he had closed the door he looked at the seat she had vacated, with a feeling of regret which he could not account for.

CHAPTER XI.

Hugh lived away from his studio, and usually spent the evening in a club, whose members were painters, writers, and musicians, with little more than aspirations, and the tools they worked with, and genius for their possessions. Here Hugh found Charlie Brock, laughing loudly at his own simple jokes, as was his nature. Brock was one of those happy men whose bodies and minds are too robust to be affected by the accidental conditions and circumstances that sadden the greater part of mankind.

Seeing Hugh, he broke away from the knot of men he centred, and catching his old companion by the arm, dragged him into a corner for a little quiet chat. Charlie's

quiet chat was broken up by bursts of laughter, and was audible in remote places.

'Came from Wales this morning—Llandudno; horrid wet, of course. Capital bit of fun. Noah—you know old Smith: wears an ulster down to his boots, and little round hat, for all the world as if he'd been turned out of the Ark for wearing boots, ha, ha!—trying to get over a boulder, caught his petticoat, and went slap into a ditch, canvas and all, ha, ha! Been at it a week, ho, ho! Off by morning mail to-morrow to Italy. The Native's there—you know, Wilks. Had a letter from him on Monday. Got half a room for me—capital!—near all the big shows. Straw mattresses, lovely atmosphere; lots of old men, peasants, fisher-boys, bad smells, macaroni, dirt, everything—ten shillings a week. Dirt cheap, ha, ha! The Native's stark mad about your cousin.'

'My cousin!'

'Miss Biron. And here I retract all I have ever hinted before against the young lady. She is there—turned the whole place upside down; every one raves about her. The most beautiful woman that has lived since Phryne, Native says. He is old enough to remember. Of course, my dear fellow, he did not mean to institute a comparison between the two ladies, although your cousin does seem rather of the rapidest. Buys pictures, encourages fiddlers, supplies poets with hair-oil, and gives immense entertainments, at which every one with a claim to art is welcome. She is the head of the Bohemian set—they call her Queen of Bohemia—and she spends money as if all Golconda was hers besides. You couldn't have spent your money better if you yourself had it to play with. The Native will introduce me at her levée. You need not

be surprised if I address you in my next letter as *beau-cousin.*'

'Does he say anything else about her?'

'Says she is coming to England in May, and will bring all her people with her. Speaks about M. Antoine de Gaillefontaine, who is hand-in-glove with the opera people, and has a theatre constructing at the estate in Barkshire for Sunday opera, with a view to enlisting the sympathies of the God-fearing. By George, there will be a revolution in England if the Bohemian queen's exchequer holds out! I shall write to you of course. By the way, you have moved from No. 4; where are you now? and what are you doing? Have you anything on hand for the Academy? Tell me all about yourself. Let me see—that little country girl was sitting for you when I left; does she still sit, or has her husband carried her off?'

Hugh told of his new model and the

event of the morning. Brock looked serious, and his style of conversation altered at once.

'I know Kate Eason well enough,' said he; 'she wouldn't be sarcastic if she could. You thought her words were shot at you because you know you deserved to be shot. I said to myself, when I saw that little woman there, and heard who she was, "Old Hugh's making a mistake, and he'll get tangled with Mrs. Reynolds."'

'You might have said so to me, Charlie. People are not so oppressed with a consciousness of your wisdom that you should deny them an occasional proof.'

'Hang it all, you're not such a child that you should depend upon your friends for direction in such simple matters of danger and safety. Are you to be warned that it is dangerous to play with fire?'

'You don't understand how this came

about. I write to Kate Eason to come and sit for me. She at that time is engaged, but sends this Mrs. Reynolds.'

'A girl you had been madly in love with a few years before.'

'Madly, as you say. Had I been soberly in love with her it might have been different. The poor soul wanted money badly. I couldn't affront her by offering charity. I knew that I should not fall in love with her.'

'And disregarded the possibility of her falling in love with you.'

'But she was married, and neither of us had a vestige of our former feeling for each other.'

'That's no reason why it should not revive. In fact it is only logical to suppose that a feeling dulled by separation should be revived by association. You are not a fool, Hugh, but your resolution makes you blind to the frailty of others. Whilst you

feel yourself to be immaculate you conceive every one you have to do with to be as exceptional. But I don't believe that even you are immaculate. If this woman had fallen in love with you, the probability is you would have fallen too. A man's vanity disposes him to love a woman who shows a preference for him. Why shouldn't Mrs. Reynolds love you again? You're better-looking than ever you were, and there's a kind of sweetness in your nature that shines in your eyes and your actions, and would make any woman love you.'

'But this woman has a husband.'

'Men have wives, yet are continually getting into scrapes. Married women are no more than flesh and blood; why shouldn't they be affected with the same complaint as men?'

'As a fact they are not.'

'Because they have less temptation. I

am glad it is all over happily, and that neither has fallen. And so you think Kate Eason pretty?'

'She is beautiful!'

'You spoony old muff! I believe you'll never be anything but a great child at heart. I hope you never may. I would give all I have to see unbounded purity in my fellow-creatures, beauty in Kate Eason, and good in everything. Old angels like you go over the clouds, and see only their silver side.'

Hugh was at his studio early, with a large canvas on which he prepared to work seriously at the new subject. René was purposely late.

'Will you forgive me?' she asked, in a tone of soft entreaty, crouching her shoulders in mock humility, and looking into his face with soft beseeching eyes.

Hugh could not answer, but looked upon the lovely picture before him in rapt admiration. She maintained her expression for a full minute, then slowly her eyes and beautiful lips melted into a soft smile. Hugh trembled with delight. Her eyes sparkled, she clapped her hands, and cried,

'Why don't you answer?'

'It is sacrilege to speak at certain moments. Have you ever come suddenly upon some beautiful bit of natural scenery, and found yourself unable to move or speak?'

René had been reflecting that the character she wished to represent would not be thus affected; she shook her head stupidly.

'And have you never heard music in an opera which has made you resent some inharmonious action upon the stage? Never felt that your senses were bound to devout inaction?'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'Then you will not be able to understand why I could not answer you.'

René saw that he looked at her as if with tender regret that such a perfect body should hold no soul in keeping with it.

'I wonder if I could understand my having the same feeling of regret that one with beautiful sentiment should be wanting in adequate feeling?' she thought.

'You can take no position that is not graceful, so choose one that is easy to yourself, for I warn you, henceforward you will have to keep to it,' said Hugh.

'Will you be very angry with me if I am naughty and move?' asked René once more beseechingly. She laughed at the effect upon Hugh.

'You will tempt me to be cross if the result is so beautiful to look upon. I won-

der how you would look if I could make you angry?'

He worked steadily. It was not difficult to get the outline—that was mechanical drawing. It was the delineation of expression that would try his powers.

It was not long before René began to fidget. Whilst Hugh was making progress she was making none. Hugh proposed she should take a rest. Whilst she was walking round the studio she bent her head over a pot of hyacinths.

'You *are* fond of flowers,' said Hugh.

'Every girl loves them.'

'Have you any in your home?'

'No. There is no one to give them to me.'

'That is no reason why you should not have them. They are sweet enough in themselves, without any additional sentiment. You should go to Covent Garden

early, and see the flower-market. You could carry home a hyacinth as I do.'

'You forget that I am a lady.'

'No, I don't.'

'I would go to the market if any one would go with me.'

Hugh laughed.

'Well, I will take you,' he said.

'That is kind,' said she, clapping her hands.

'We must be there not later than seven.'

'Oh, isn't that dreadfully early?'

'Where shall I meet you?'

'By the lions in Trafalgar Square.'

'And will you be there at half-past six?'

René promised.

The next morning Hugh waited an hour at the appointed place, and then went alone to the market, and with two pots of spring flowers in his arms and

a pipe in his mouth walked pleasantly to his studio. He sat down for some minutes before the outline he had made, pleased with the work he had done, and delighted with the prospect of carrying out a difficult task. He lit a fire, fetched some groceries, and cooked a bachelor's breakfast. When that was finished he looked round the room with dissatisfaction, and set about putting it in order. The more untidy it was the better he liked it hitherto: his present discontent can only be explained by a feeling that it might be unpleasing to the sensitive taste of a woman. He looked at his watch at ten o'clock, and fished it out every five minutes until eleven, from which hour until twelve it hung upon his easel, and was consulted at uncertain but brief intervals. He could not feel angry with René, but began to fear grievously she would not come. Her appearance made his

heart bound, and his happiness was apparent in his face.

'Why, you don't look a bit vexed!' said she.

He shook his head, looking at her beautiful face with delight.

'Perhaps you didn't keep your appointment,' she suggested.

'Oh, but I did, and waited there until the policeman regarded me with a suspicious eye. I believe he thought I had sinister designs upon the lions.'

'And weren't you terribly angry then?'

'No. My sentiments haven't altered since yesterday. I don't forget that you are a lady.'

René was genuinely pleased, and so forgetting herself, acknowledged Hugh's speech with a grand curtsy.

'What do you think of the alteration I have made in the studio?'

'You have made it beautiful. And, oh! these are lovely flowers! Now this serves me right. If I hadn't been so lazy, these would have been mine.'

'They are yours, whether or no, if you will have them. I bought them for no one else.'

René turned round and looked at him, with such true gratitude in her eyes as Hugh had not seen there before.

'You waited a long, long while for me; and then, instead of being angry, you spend money and carry two heavy pots all the way from Covent Garden here to give pleasure to me. Now that is generosity.'

She sat patiently all the morning, and could not feel angry with this amiable cousin. When she was prepared to leave she said,

'I will be as kind to these flowers as I was cruel to you. For your sake I will not

neglect them. Aren't you going to do any more work to-day?'

'Yes; but I shall carry those flowers to Trafalgar Square first.'

'Oh, no. It looks so foolish for a man to carry two pots of flowers.'

'Don't you think it is better to look foolish than to feel selfish? Unless you fear what people may think to see you with such a queer porter, I will carry them.'

People in the street did stare at him with his tulips and cyclamen; but René was pleased with the service rendered her, and his manner of rendering it. Without regard to her social position, but for herself alone, Hugh was paying her a compliment which she fully appreciated. Another gentleman might have carried the pots—in a cab; but she knew of none who would have made himself conspicuous without showing that he was making a sacrifice for her.

Hugh was passionately fond of Nature, and the tulips gave him a subject to talk upon. Of primroses—where the first were to be found—and crocuses and sky-anemones he spoke; and then of birds and their songs, and the habits of squirrels and dormice. Of these simple things he talked with a pleasant freedom, as if rather to an old companion than to a young girl whose acquaintance was of to-day. Such conversation was a novelty to René, whom men addressed usually as if she could understand and appreciate nothing but verbal compliment and flattery. She experienced the delight of being treated by a man as his equal in agreeable taste and intelligence. Hugh's voice, too, was musical and soft and sweet; in his whole manner there was to René an inexpressible charm, which soothed her spirit like the narcotic odour of some flowers.

All too soon for both they reached Trafalgar Square, and there Hugh left her, giving up the pots.

'No wonder that little wretch loves him,' said René, with a capriciousness not inconsistent with her temper. And then, thinking of Mattie, she became angry again with Hugh—and herself.

CHAPTER XII.

Hugh found his work more difficult even than he had anticipated. René's face was more variable than an April sky, and corresponded with the moods of her temper. She generally commenced the sitting with an affectation of sensuality which Hugh disliked; but he was not proof against the sly seduction; and when she looked at him with voluptuous eyes, and her soft lips curled in inviting smiles, the passionate blood rushed to his temples, and it was with a struggle he turned to the contemplation of work, and resisted the impulse to catch this most beautiful of creatures in his arms, and press her to his lips. Later she would fall into her natural habit, moved by some delicate expression of her cousin's, and show

a kind regard, tempered by maidenly reserve. This phase was always followed by petulant irritability and a tone of sarcasm, which Hugh no longer doubted to be intentional.

Hugh worked hard at his subject, laying aside his brush grudgingly when there was no longer enough light to paint by. He found that he got on more to his satisfaction when René was absent than when she was before him. Frequently in the day-time he undid the work of the night before, and viewed the result with dissatisfaction. No definite expression was to be got from the life. Yet he had no inclination to dismiss his model, and do better work from his memory of her. His thoughts turned to her in her absence, and he found himself thinking perpetually of her, from sheer inability to divert his mind to other considerations. Artistic devotion to her as a most

beautiful creation was not the feeling which prevailed exclusively: her acts and words, not less than her physical beauty, were the subject of his reflections.

She astonished and perplexed him with the anomalous character she presented. He found it as difficult to determine how she felt towards him as to define her general character. Whilst he worked he was absorbed in his subject; but in the intervals of rest during her sitting he had scope for observation, and gathered sufficient material for after-contemplation.

One night, upon leaving the club, he walked to his studio, though his home lay in the opposite direction, with no other purpose than to look at the picture he had left but a few hours before. He lit a candle; then he lit his pipe and turned to the easel. Yes, there was something of her there; her eyes looked out at him from the

canvas, and almost unconsciously he removed the pipe from his lips, and laid it aside in that presence. He sat long before his work, regarding it with a sadness he could not explain. There was a melancholy interest about it, which increased as the likeness grew in beauty. Night after night he returned to indulge in the sweet sadness that contemplation of the face produced. Such a feeling never possessed him when René provoked his passion. Then, even whilst each fibre of his body glowed with fervid yearning towards her, his soul was overcast with regret. Her glance was suggestive of a feeling which destroyed her perfection. It was to him a hectic flush, lending a dreadful lustre. A fault in any thing of beauty would have moved him with sadness; but René's defect he deplored more deeply because he saw her disposition was, but for that, pure and good.

As his mind became more and more deeply occupied with these reflections, he perceived that his enthusiasm was less for his portrait than for the original, and that his regard for the beautiful model was no longer merely æsthetic.

Beyond his own unsold pictures and some casts, there were few of the adornments which distinguish the rich or the amateur artist's studio in Hugh Biron's room. A pair of foils were the most useless articles of the place; and they in the winter-time served the purpose of fire-irons, and had even been employed to cook a chop. In the rest which broke a sitting René took up one of these, and holding it horizontally level with her eye, looked along its edge critically, and asked,

'Do you fence?'

'A little.'

She handed him the foil, and taking the other, put herself in position, and called, 'En guard.'

'I decline the combat,' said Hugh, laughing.

'Are you afraid?'

'Yes.'

'Of hurting me? I would have you a little less generous and more complimentary. Fear me, and defend yourself.'

'But I have no masks.'

'I will not touch your face.'

'But yours?'

'Again you are uncomplimentary.'

'I meant to imply that I am awkward.'

'And I meant to imply that I am not.'

'It is so uncommon for ladies to fence.'

'The greater reason that I should adopt the practice. You flattered me yesterday by acknowledging that my tastes were exceptional. My father taught fencing.'

'As well as dancing?'

'Naturally; a good dancer should be a good fencer. I think I can dance well.'

'The poetry of motion is in every step you take. I believe you could do anything you wish.'

'To begin with, can I make you take up your guard, or not?'

Hugh saluted and 'engaged,' with dread undiminished by René's confident assurance.

'I would as soon play with a chisel on the head of a Canova,' he said to himself, thinking how one awkward slip might bring his weapon in contact with the lovely form before him.

He attempted nothing but defence, and did his best, knowing that her safety depended on his dexterity. Nevertheless he was worsted again and again.

'This is all very well for a beginning,' said René, 'but now that you see I can fence a little, please defend yourself in real earnest. I haven't touched a foil for six months. I shall be less maladroit when my wrist is warm.'

'I have played my best.'

'You said you could fence a little; you have done nothing yet. En guard!'

René in a spirit of mischief made quick passes, delighted to observe the terror with which Hugh regarded his own point. He grew hot, he lost all presence of mind, he trembled with agitation, as he saw the heedless mirth that sparkled in her eyes. He resolved to bring the play to a close, and forgetful of all rules he dropped his foil, and brought his hand to his breast at the very moment René thrust. Her button caught the back of his hand, and raised the skin.

In a moment René had flung aside her foil.

'Oh, what a fool I am!' she cried, catching his wounded hand in hers.

It was she whose face expressed anxiety now, and her anxiety imparted pleasure to Hugh. The sight of his own blood did not affect him; his eyes were upon the white fingers that trembled as they tenderly closed about his.

She whipped a handkerchief from her pocket, put it to her cheek to see if it were soft, and bound it gently round the wounded hand, saying never a word the while. Hugh was too pleased to be thus tenderly cared for to check her by a word. Her arm touched his. Her head was bent so near his, that leaning forward a few inches he might have touched her hair with his lips. Should he? Rapture quivered in his arm. René looked quickly into his face to see if

he were faint. Her eyes were suffused with a tear.

'Good heavens! she loves me,' thought Hugh.

The occasion was not great enough for tenderness. Had Hugh's wound been more serious she would have been dry-eyed; but she saw it was slight, and the relief from a sudden and serious apprehensive regret, and a flash of something like love and pity, brought forth the ready tear.

When she saw nothing of faintness in his face, but something of passionate ecstasy, she winked her eyes and dropped them hastily, ashamed of the tear that fell.

'It is a mere scratch,' she said, tying the ends of the handkerchief quickly; 'and now I'll put the weapons away until you can use them without frightening your adversary out of all reason.'

'I wish you had hurt me as I deserved,

that I might have had a little more of the sympathy I don't deserve,' said Hugh.

He could not use a brush with his hand bandaged, and was idle whilst René put on her bonnet and waterproof. He was glad of the excuse which allowed him to watch her in movement. Not a motion was without grace.

'I suppose a disabled artist will not want a model,' said she.

'The patient wants a nurse. But perhaps I sha'n't have the good fortune to be a patient to-morrow; so you will be required in your other capacity. I can use my fingers now quite well. Do you know, I think your cripple could shake hands—will you try him?'

She gave her hand: it was the first time they had touched in that way. He would have put her fingers to his lips, but she snatched them away and left him with a laugh.

He sat and gave himself up to reflection. As passion cooled and his thought grew calm, he felt shame. The girl came to him in a professional capacity, and he had no right to take advantage of her position even in so slight a matter as that of attempting to kiss her hand. Had she been a visitor of his own station it would have been more excusable. He had lost his self-control, and behaved ungently in treating her with less respect than he hoped she deserved. But had she not repeatedly tempted him, and was she not very, very beautiful, and was he bound to be better than ninety-nine men in a hundred?

'Oh, hang it all!' he said, turning impatiently to his easel and taking up a brush. 'The girl's eyes tell me to kiss her a dozen times in the day. Why shouldn't I? When a man restrains his feeling towards a girl of this kind, it usually

eventuates in his making a fool of himself by offering her marriage. It's ten to one but the girl has some idea of catching me in a trap of that kind. Heard perhaps from Mattie Reynolds that I am related to the rich folks at Riverford. Halloa, what's this?'

He had been untwisting the bandage from his hand, for he could not use the brush he had taken up, and he knew his wound to be too slight to require covering, and now he was looking at the monogram elaborately worked upon the soft cambric.

'Never can make out these precious tanglegrams. Mrs. Eason uses expensive handkerchiefs! not that I ought to think of that when she gives them so readily when a fellow is in distress. (How the deuce can she make a K and E out of this?) She was quite affected by the accident. (It

looks like B. R.) The worst and best of women are alike good when a man's suffering appeals to them. (Who's B. R. or R. B.?) I wonder if this girl is just what she says, or if in reality she is a deep designing—(R. B.?)—who thinks to marry the rising young artist, Hugh Biron? Perhaps her name is not Kate Eason at all. R. B.? R. B.? R. B.—René Biron, by Jove!'

CHAPTER XIII.

If it has not been shown that René was inconsistent, jealous, and unjust, labour has been wasted, and she is, as she stands here, a mere lay figure, and no woman of flesh and blood.

When she was out of Charlroy Street she stepped into a cab and gave herself up to tetchy meditation, broken by pettish thoughts of revenge. She was angry with Hugh, she was angry with herself, she was angry with Mattie—all without knowing why or choosing to seek an explanation. Looking at the affair from her point of view, she should have exulted. Her stratagem, so far, had succeeded as well as she had hoped. She had infatuated her cousin,

and supplanted Mattie Reynolds, whom he seemed quite to have forgotten. What else did she desire, which not having could make her so wrathful? Safely enough she might go back now to her Bohemian subjects and M. de Gaillefontaine, with a reasonable assurance that Hugh would not pursue Mattie in the remote neighbourhood in which she and her husband now lived. The intention of returning to Italy never entered her mind, which instead was occupied with a scheme of vengeance that should bring mortification and discomfiture upon her cousin. Ah! she could not sit still as she thought of Hugh Biron in conjunction with Mattie Reynolds; it made her furious.

She hated Hugh for not despising her in the ignoble character she assumed, and would not see that the very fact of her taking his sin to heart so deeply was in itself

a proof that she was as guilty as he. For if he were base to love her, how could she be otherwise to love him? And she did love him, or she would not have hated him. Simple virtue does not abhor guilt with the emotion that René felt. A horseshoe is only a horseshoe until it is magnetised; then one pole attracts and the other repels with equal force, and we call the horseshoe by another name.

'He must be simply an animal,' she thought. 'He has seen me but for a few days, and a dozen times an hour he would tell me he loves me if he had the courage. Love!—love won by a wanton smile and an actress's leer. Such love is good enough no doubt for a barmaid—a Mattie!' she uttered the name with scorn and contempt, grinding her heel down as though she felt the girl under her feet; 'but he shall see it is not fit for better women. To-morrow

I will read them both a lesson which shall stick by them.'

It was in René's imperious disposition to brook no delay. Her man of business, knowing the nature of his tenure, obeyed her behest, and without writing a single letter put Tom Reynolds in possession of a shop. René herself saw the new house, and offered suggestions which were readily accepted. She went with Tom and his wife to purchase the stock, and in hinting what they should have, looked out such things as she herself might be induced to buy if she saw them in a shop-window. By the close of the week everything was ready; and on the following Monday the shop, with its stock of pretty wicker-work, was open. The heavy baskets that Tom had learned to make were piled against the door—Mattie was prouder of them than of

all else—the window was filled with light nicknacks, and an admirable stock of useful articles furnished the inside of the shop. In a room adjoining Tom worked, pausing to listen for the advent of a customer or the fragmentary bulletins that Mattie occasionally brought. No. 1: 'There's a boy looking in the window, Tom dear.' No. 2: 'The boy's gone.' No. 3: 'There's an old gentleman and an old lady.' No. 4: 'They're still there; they look as if they were going to buy the little basket with the blue ribbon at eighteenpence.' No. 5: 'They've gone.' No. 6, delivered in breathless excitement: 'I've been to the shop-door; they're stopping a little way off, and the old gentleman's feeling in his pocket to see if he has eighteenpence.—Sh! Here-theyare!'

It *was* the eighteenpenny basket which the old lady would like to look at; and

while Mattie explained its admirable qualities, the old gentleman stood respectfully behind his wife, and looked under his spectacles with smiling approval at the pretty young shopkeeper.

Yes, the old lady would have the basket; and little she knew how she dispelled fear, and set Mattie's heart beating with joy, by her small purchase. Mattie's trembling fingers could scarcely tie the string about her parcel.

'A very nice show of goods you have here, young lady,' said the old gentleman pleasantly.

'Yes, sir; my husband makes those baskets against the door.'

'Ah, and very good strong baskets they are too. Capital for potatoes, or coals, or horse-beans, or carrots, I daresay.'

Mattie had the money and wished her customers gone now, that she might rush

to her husband; but the old lady had got her glasses on by this time, and was looking about her with curiosity, asking questions which required no answers, and behaving generally after the fashion of a good old lady. A knife-basket at three shillings and sixpence seemed so cheap and good that she insisted upon having it, though her husband, whose funds were low and who knew he should have to carry it home, meekly objected. But the old lady was obstinate, and the basket was bought. Tom gave a cough within his room to intimate that he was aware of what was going forward.

'You are our first customers,' said Mattie. Whereupon the shade of sadness passed from the good old gentleman's brow, and he and his wife left the shop in delight, promising to recommend the shop, and fully intending what they said.

'O my dear, dear Tom, here's five shillings!' cried Mattie, putting them into his hand. She pulled his head to her breast, and kissed his curly hair, but stopped suddenly, possessed with a horrid suspicion. 'Is the money good?'

Tom nearly broke his teeth, but without bending the silver.

'Shop! Is any one at home?' cried a voice from the shop.

'Oh, here's another customer! What may I serve you with, sir?'

But the past was not forgotten. Despite the excitement and bliss of those busy days, there was time for Mattie to look silently into space, and think and sigh. She had a secret she could not digest, but which lay upon her like an incubus, and harrowed her in dreams. Beautiful Miss Biron had shown her what dangerous

ground she had trodden, and the iniquity of doing a thing which she dared not tell her husband. She had deceived him; and even now she dreaded discovery. What could he suppose if he knew what she really had done? What but that she had renewed her love for Mr. Biron! Miss Biron believed that, and would not believe her; though her husband was so forgiving, could he help believing her guilty? Oh, how terrible it would be to be suspected of wrong and forgiven, and by him whom she loved so truly and devotedly! She was careless what Miss Biron thought, what anybody thought, while her husband did not entertain that unjust suspicion. She even suspected the truth, that Tom knew her secret. 'Perhaps,' she thought, 'he knows where I have been, knows the worst, yet suspects still worse; and he is trying to forgive me now. Why has he never

asked me questions about my occupation? Why has he said nothing of Miss Biron's action in this matter, which should seem so strange and unaccountable to him?'

Watching Tom at moments when he was unconscious of her presence, she gathered confirmation of her fears from his manner.

Our moods are so various that one watching us for a particular expression will almost certainly find it. It was so with Tom. He wished to know nothing, not a word more of what was gone. That was all wiped away. He believed the best of Mattie, and would not think of anything against her. But he detected, by the subtle sense which Nature sends to one whose natural faculty is impaired, the care in Mattie's heart. Was it that she showed a clinging love for him as one striving to do her duty, or to compensate for some late defection? 'Poor lass, good little

soul!' thought he, 'striving with heart and soul to overcome the inclinations of her nature, to forget the handsome and the perfect, and to do the hard duty that has fallen to her to love and cherish a disfigured sightless husband.'

These two were no artists in acting, and their best attempt to conceal what was at their hearts betrayed them to the shrewd eye of René Biron, who could see the natural complexion under an inch of paint.

'I want you to come and see me at nine o'clock to-morrow morning,' said René to Mattie, when she had heard the brilliant report of progress in the business from the husband and wife. 'Can you be spared? My man-servant shall take your place.'

Mattie would, of course, do anything to oblige Miss Biron, and her husband could spare her; but the little wife dreaded the morrow, as she wondered what was re-

quired of her. Miss Biron was pale, and her eyes flashed anger, and her lips were set and hard. Mattie was glad her husband could not see that look upon the young lady's face, and she was glad when René reëntered the cab and departed.

René's servant came at eight o'clock, and Mattie walked to the hotel with the fear of one going before a harsh judge to answer an unknown charge.

René was reserved; she spoke scarcely a word before she left the hotel, and Mattie took her place behind her as they walked through the streets. When she recognised that they were in the vicinity of Oxford Street she nerved herself, and stepping to René's side, asked with trembling lips where she was being taken.

'You are going with me where you have been before, and I am about to end Mr. Biron's acquaintance with you.'

'Thank God!' said Mattie, falling back a step or two. She felt stronger now she knew the extent of her trial, and was glad to think that this unhappy connection was to come to a definite close.

It was a quarter to ten when they stopped at 30 Charlroy Street. In answer to her inquiry, the landlady of the house told René that Mr. Biron was not yet come. She had been instructed to give the model admission to the studio if she came before Hugh; and the two young women entered the room.

There was a daïs at one end of the room, with a screen at the back, behind which the model made such arrangements of her toilet as were necessary. On the daïs René sat while Hugh painted.

When she had removed her hat and waterproof, she said to Mattie,

'You are to sit and be silent on the

chair behind this screen. That is all you will have to do until it is time for you to go home. I will tell you when that time is come.'

Hugh was late this morning. The previous day, after deciphering the monogram, he sat awhile with the handkerchief in his hand, bewildered by his discovery and the strange conclusions it suggested. Then he referred to a note-book, in which he kept the addresses of models; and finding among them that of Kate Eason, he resolved to settle at once the question of her identity. He had been told that she kept a shop. Nothing was easier than to walk into the shop and make a purchase and an inquiry, if observation were not sufficient.

He left the studio and directed his steps to Kennington.

There was every reason for believing

that his beautiful model was René Biron, and not Kate Eason. It was not impossible that a girl should be perfect in face and figure, intelligent, well educated, and a model; but such a combination was singular, and it was next to impossible that one so peculiarly gifted should not be the subject of remark among those artists who knew her. He had heard of Kate Eason long before René presented herself to him in that character; but with no especial comment beyond the recommendation that she was a good sitter, and knew how to behave herself. Now René was not a good sitter, but restless and impatient of remaining long in one position; and certainly, as a model, she did not know how to behave herself. Never before had a model forced him to take up a sword in self-defence. He had heard nothing of her beauty, except from Charlie

Brock, who spoke of it slightingly. Hugh had no reason to believe his friend generally dull and wanting in perception, and he could not disbelieve his own senses. He wondered how the contradictions these circumstances exposed had escaped his observation so long.

In Kennington he found the shop he sought. 'Eason, Stationer,' was upon the *fascia*, and there were artists' materials in the window. The woman who served him the pencils he asked for had the unmistakable expression of a professional model.

'Are you Mrs. Eason?' he asked, feeling it almost unnecessary to question.

'Yes, sir.'

'Kate Eason?'

'Yes, sir.'

'I am an artist. I have heard that you sit.'

'I used to sit; but I have not sat lately. My shop and my children occupy my time.'

This settled the fact that his model was not Kate Eason, and to his mind almost as certainly that she was René Biron. Her beauty and her audacity coincided with the rumours which had reached him. But the crowning evidence was Fox's prediction that, under some pretence, she would introduce herself to him, and seek to inveigle him into marriage.

The behaviour of this fictitious 'Kate Eason' entirely coincided with that prediction, and explained all which had hitherto appeared unaccountable. Who but René Biron had the inducement to make him marry her? Who but she would have the audacity to undertake such a design?

His discovery altered the view he took of his own conduct considerably. He could not feel regret for having kissed her hand now, and he saw no objection to his kissing her lips if she chose to let him. After that

salutation she had laughed, and her laugh had struck but a dismal echo from his heart. What folly to weep because another laughs! It is good to laugh and to make others laugh. By George, he would make her merry once more! Why should he not take the tempting bait, now that he could see the hook and how to avoid being caught by it? He might love and he might ride away in the nick of time, bidding the siren be careful in future to choose a simpleton for her purpose.

But when he sat at night before his dear picture, his spirits fell, and his heart ached over the loss he sustained by his discovery. No longer, even at intervals, could he delight in regarding this woman as absolutely beautiful. The white snow was melted, and, mingled indistinguishably with the soil, pure no longer. He must worship her no more. He could not feel

again that throbbing delight in his heart when some accidental incident suggested a purity of thought according with the holiness in her eyes. Those eyes were liars, and her goodness but the mask of evil. This canvas had in it more to love than she, since in it there was nothing to despise. And she was unworthy to be loved whom lately he had blushed to think of lightly. Henceforth he must regard her only as a creature sacrificing the noblest gifts of God to retain a possession which was not hers. There was but one name for such as she, and Hugh sickened as he thought it. He had rather she had lost her life than the sweet purity with which he at times had invested her.

'O you beautiful thing!' he murmured, looking at the portrait with the tenderest melancholy, 'I would give you all that you want and all that I have besides, if only it

could restore to me the perfect image I possessed.'

He rather dreaded than desired to meet her the next morning, and it was late when he reached his studio. He was told that his model had been waiting some time.

'This is the first time she has had to wait for me,' thought Hugh, walking up to his room slowly; 'I wish she had not come at all. How shall I behave to her? I need not trouble to dissimulate; she will read from my altered manner that I have discovered her secret.'

The lighter thoughts and intentions had gone from Hugh as quickly as they came to him. He did foolish and wrong things occasionally, as all men do, but never deliberately.

Once in the past, finding himself at the gates of the Mabille, he went in and danced, to the delight of his friends and the people

of Paris. Another night he started from his hotel to repeat the performance; but the walk gave him time for reflection, and no inducement could move him beyond Punchinello in the Champs Elysées; and when Punch went home he insisted upon following an example so good.

And so on this morning he entered his studio with absolutely 'no intentions,' but some pain of regret in his heart.

René was in profile, seated in a reclining chair, a book in her lap, a hand behind her head, and one little foot swinging idly.

'That pretty boot is intended for my observation,' thought Hugh; 'and its wearer knows as well as I that I am looking at it now.'

He shut the door, and René, turning her head languidly, without altering her position, smiled a sweet salutation.

'God, how bewitching she looks!'

thought Hugh, recalling to mind a surmise that had filled him with emotion such as was creeping upon him now as he gazed. Indeed the sombre night-thoughts were already tipped with rosy gold.

René, still smiling under her eyes, blushed, threw the book on the floor, and held out her hand eagerly to him, still nursing her pretty head with the other, still swinging the little foot.

Hugh's thoughts now sparkled and glistened in this light of beauty, and they were tempting witches who erst were warning spirits. He took her hand, still looking in her face; he pressed it, and would have unclasped his fingers but that hers clung. He held her hand thus for some seconds. Neither said a word; but René's eyes told what no womanly tongue could say, and her smile was ineffably soft. He raised the fingers to his lips, and gave them

not one, but twenty mad kisses, and then held the delicate hand before his eyes. René still smiled, looking upwards to his face; blushed, still nursed her head, still swung her pretty foot. The sleeve upon her arm thus raised had slipped back to the elbow. Upon her naked white arm Hugh's eye turned with devouring appetite. René saw his glance; and taking her hand from behind her head she pulled back the sleeve to her shoulder.

'What do you think of your model's arm?' she asked, in her sly drawling voice.

Hugh's answer was given on his knees in a hundred burning kisses upon the white soft limb.

'Whatever you are,' he cried, 'I am your slave for ever!'

In one instant the expression of voluptuous languor in René's countenance changed to one of fierce energy. Every

feature of her face and body was animated with intense scorn as she sprang to her feet, her flashing eyes still upon the man kneeling by her chair.

She struck aside the screen as if it were a gossamer, crying,

'And what have you to say to this other woman?'

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TWO KNAVES AND A QUEEN.

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TWO KNAVES AND A QUEEN.

A Novel.

BY

FRANK BARRETT,

AUTHOR OF 'FANTOCCINI,' 'MAGGIE?' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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TWO KNAVES AND A QUEEN.

CHAPTER I.

Poor Mattie, disclosed, sat with clasped hands and down-bent head, listening in awe as René, inspired by passion, shaped into eloquent words and fluent passages those feelings of anger, reproach, contempt, detestation, which had been seething within her until now in a fragmentary incoherent form.

René ceased to speak, as if there were no more to be said, rather than because her ability to say more failed. She was silent at the moment when another word might

have lessened the effect she had made; and she swept at once from the room with an imperial dignity that denied the right of the accused to vindicate himself.

Hugh was paralysed, and only rose from his knees to stand looking vaguely at the door through which René had passed, with no abatement of the astonishment created in him. He was perfectly unconscious of Mattie's presence—she passed before his eyes without his notice, and he was surprised, when his self-possession returned, to find her gone.

She too was shaken; but her heart lightened as she neared her home. She said to her husband,

'I will tell you where I have been when the evening comes and we are alone. I have much that I wish to tell you, Tom dear.'

And now the evening was come, the

little shop was closed, and Mattie sat by her husband, holding his hand in hers.

'I want you to believe me, dear,' said she; 'I want you to have greater faith in my true love for you than you have yet had.'

'I love you, dear wife!'

'Yes; but I would have you think that I am worthy to be loved, and that can only be by your believing all that I have to tell you; and I must tell you, Tom. I have had but one secret from you, and that has harassed me all day, and troubled me even in my dreams at night. Sometimes I tried to keep awake, lest I might say in my dreams what I dared not tell you. It was wrong to harbour one little thought, keeping it secret from you; but I did it for the best, foolishly, and like a naughty child, yet rather fearing to hurt you than that you would punish me. Now the whole thing is ended—oh, thank God!—and never,

never more may I do or think that which I would not have you know. When we were very poor, dear,—before you could make the baskets well, and the buyers used to grumble and pay less than they promised for your work,—I could see how anxious you were, troubling yourself lest there might not be food for me, and I puzzled my stupid head to think how I might help to bring in money, instead of draining our little fund; and something besides your anxiety made me eager to earn money whilst I could. I saw that Kate Eason earned quite a great deal of money by sitting to artists—enough to pay me for minding her shop five times over; and I thought I might sit to artists also, and so bring more money. When I spoke to Kate about it she was jealous, thinking that I meant to engage myself to the artists she knew, and she told me I need mind her shop no more,

but begin my new profession at once. I left her very dispirited, for I knew no artists, and had lost my only means of helping you. Well, as I was walking along, thinking how foolish I had been to lose my occupation, I suddenly met Mr. Hugh Biron; and having no thought but of my present trouble, it struck me that he might know of an artist who required a model, and so I made bold to stop and tell him of my trouble. He would have given me money, but I told him I did not want charity but employment. He said he himself wanted a model to sit for a country girl, and that I should just do if I would accept the usual terms. It was not until he asked where I lived and proposed to come and see you, that I thought you might misunderstand my motives, and fear there might be something more than my wish to get money and be useful in my sitting to Mr. Biron, especially

as I had told you nothing of my notion. It was so impossible for me to feel for any one the love I bore my dear husband, that the idea never occurred to me. Then, knowing how pure my heart was and how free from any wrong thought, I saw no harm in accepting this engagement and keeping it secret from you. It seemed to me, then, that so long as my thought and act were good, it was harmless to keep them secret. Truly, I believed it wise to do good and spare you pain at the same time; else I would have been glad to tell you of my new occupation and Mr. Hugh's great kindness. And this is what I would have you believe, now that I have parted from Mr. Biron and shall go there no more; and when I see how unwise, perhaps unkind and wrong, I have been, I would have you believe that never in one single instant has my thought been untrue to you. If

ever I thought of the past, it was to think how happily I had escaped making a miserable match with him who could have no feeling for the simple things and habits and ways which you and I together love, dear Tom.'

'You thought all this, Mattie, and him so handsome and fine and generous.'

'Handsome! Why, you are ten times handsomer than he is! 'Tis but his kindness for which I admire him; and what are guineas to him? No more than the pennies we give from our slender means. Handsome! Ah, he may be to those who haven't seen the like of you! I would like to know where he would be, standing beside you! You are twice as fine as he. He has no curls like these!' she ran her fingers through them admiringly. 'They do share the love of your heart, these curls; they cling to my fingers as if they loved them! And then

his face, oh, it is a baby's, a girl's—nothing, nothing, nothing like this dear one's!'

She pressed her soft cheek to his and kissed him fondly.

'And will you indeed believe all I have said?'

'Ay, Mattie; it is the least I can do for cruelly misdoubting you. Surely it was against my conscience, against my will, I doubted you, and believed that lying varmint, Fox. I shall never forgive myself when I remember that my want of faith has led Miss Biron to think unjustly of you, my dear.'

''Tis not your fault—'tis Fox you must not forgive.'

'Now I think of him, I know what Samson felt when he was bound and weak in the hands of his enemies, and praying for strength. I wish for sight just that I might punish him who has led me to wrong you.'

''Twill be punishment enough for him

if he sees his plan fail and finds that you love me for all his efforts. Fancy he is here and do kiss me.'

'I want no such fancies to make me kiss you, dear.'

'Tom dear,' said Mattie when she could speak.

'Yes, wife.'

Mattie screwed her head into his neck, and, dropping her voice very low, said coyly, 'Did I not say that besides your anxiety there was another reason why I should earn money?'

'Now I think of it, you did; and I marvel what it might be.'

'I suspected then, and I know now, that —that—' After a little hesitation she put lips to his ear and whispered what even the eaves-dropping historian—sharp of hearing as he is—could not catch.

Tom gave an exclamation of joyful surprise, and, drawing his wife still nearer to him, said,

'And to think I should think ill of you at such a time!'

'Say no more of that, dear. Let us talk of the time to come. You will hear the little voice, and feel the tiny soft fingers clutching yours, won't you?'

It was not long before René found that she had done wrong. She could be as unjust as the best of women in moments of excitement, but she was incapable of deliberate injustice. One visit to the Reynoldses after the scene in Hugh's studio convinced her of Mattie's innocence and her own folly. Mattie's whispered condition was a sufficient argument against the prejudice of any woman. René's pride was of a good kind, and she acknowledged her fault without

hesitation. 'I have made a fool of myself,' she said as she went to her hotel; 'and it is not the first time. I always am doing something silly to repent of. I would rather by half do something downright bad than have mischief come of my silly good intentions. I have wronged the girl, and for all I know my cousin as well. He may be just as innocent as she. If he treated me as a worthless woman, it was no better than I deserved. Why should he not believe the worst of me, and in my final position see only a creature jealous of the favours shown a rival? I ought to be ashamed of myself, and I am.'

She recalled the occasions when Hugh had treated her with delicate consideration —at times when she lapsed from her assumed into her natural character; and the reluctance with which he had yielded to her seductions. She blushed as she thought

of the character she had sustained, and its significance to the mind of one who did not know that it was entirely an assumption. It exasperated her to think how she had succeeded. 'I have been worse than a fool,' she said; 'I have debased myself. I am a fit one truly to provide for the welfare of others with my stupid schemes—I who cannot take care of myself! Oh, would that I had some great, kind, wise friend to guide me! If I am only left long enough to my own guidance I shall make a regular *fiasco*, that's clear.'

Hitherto she had been angry with Mattie and her cousin; but her vexation was far greater now that she had herself alone to blame. Vexation was not the only feeling from which she suffered; there was something of sorrow in her heart, and she experienced again the sense of desolation that saddened her after the death of her grand-

father. Whom now had she lost? She had separated herself from her cousin for ever; but was that to be regretted? She had despised him until she despised herself. Indeed now she felt irritated in thinking of him as the cause of her present humiliation. No, she had no regard for him; certainly not the affection she had fancied at one time her kinsman would awaken within her. She did not wish to see him again; that was the event she most feared: she dreaded to step outside her hotel lest she might meet him in the street. No, no, it was not his loss that depressed her; it was but her own folly she repented. Perhaps it was this heavy London air that made her feel as though she would like to cry. Yet she was in no hurry to leave London, and thought with strong disinclination of a return to Italy and the life of gay variety. She asked herself what it was she wanted.

A life of seclusion in a religious house? No. Fame and the applause of a multitude? No. What period of her existence had been so satisfactory that she could wish its continuance? She taxed her memory, but could recall no instance of unalloyed pleasure; and giving up the task, she fell a-thinking of the sittings in Charlroy Street —the moments when Hugh had been undisturbed by sensuous influence—as at that time when he walked beside her through the streets with the pots of spring-flowers in his arms. Then the sense of desolation and wretchedness returned to her; and were those brief minutes beside her cousin the happiest of her life? So that the thought of them, as of joy for ever gone, oppressed her with melancholy. Such a conclusion she would not recognise.

'I must have a good gallop. I have stayed here two days for no earthly reason.

No wonder I grow morbid and sick,' she cried, starting to her feet. And she rang her bell and gave orders for immediate departure, and sent a telegram to the housekeeper at Riverford to prepare rooms for her. When all was ready, René said to her maid,

'Take the two pots of flowers with you from my room.'

'They are nearly done flowering, miss.'

René took no notice of the demur, and the maid carried the pots, wondering what miss could want of such shabby blooms, when there were ten thousand better at the place to which they were being carried.

A possibility suggested itself to the mind of René which took off her attention from the book she was reading in the carriage, and made her quite anxious to reach Riverford. Perhaps Hugh would write.

Of course he had not known her address

in London. Hope conflicted with hope. She would like to know that he thought the best and not the worst of her: yet she would not have him write to apologise, to ask forgiveness; that would be lowering his standard. But if she was indifferent whether her cousin loved her, or liked her no better than she liked him, why should she trouble herself as to his opinion of her? *Peste!* It was mere woman's curiosity, which she should be above entertaining. Nevertheless, and despite the interest of her book, she wondered again and again whether her cousin had written and what he could say.

When the train stopped at Riverford a familiar voice asked René for the honour to be permitted to assist her to alight upon the platform; and there stood M. Antoine de Gaillefontaine.

CHAPTER II.

René was pleased to see M. de Gaillefontaine; she felt the want of one who could take her out of her contemplative mood—one with an independent flow of small-talk, and the ability to amuse. M. de Gaillefontaine could talk for hours upon *bagatelles*, with no greater incentive than now and then 'yes' or 'no,' to show him his hearer was interested in the variety of trifles selected for his amusement; for he was not wasteful of material. He would change his topics a dozen times to hit upon the subject of interest to his companion. Undoubtedly he had the ability to amuse. He had devoted his life to making himself pleasant to others, as the surest means of making them

pleasant to him. He knew that conversation, to be agreeable, must be regulated with a regard to the peculiarities of the hearer, and that it were the foolishest waste of time to talk of the digestive system to the astronomer, or solar systems to the gastronomist. His primary object in opening a conversation was to discover his companion's want; that discovered, the chat he supplied never failed to please.

The look of apathy in René's face before she saw him, and the smile of pleasure when he spoke, showed him her requirements and the line he was to take. It was clear he must be entertaining, and refer but lightly to the grave matters which had been harrowing him with doubt and misgiving for the past four or five weeks. He must avoid questions, and satisfy his curiosity without probing wounds.

He began to talk at once, and the bright

gaiety of his voice was to René like the feel of brisk frosty air after close confinement. There was unmistakable sincerity in the pleasure he expressed in again seeing her, which warmed her towards him, and overcame a certain involuntary feeling of reserve and distrust that was habitually present to her mind in her relations with him—a feeling of which she was conscious, but at a loss to account.

Antoine was delighted—ah, so delighted! —to see once more his ancient pupil, his esteemed benefactress, his dear friend! It were grief to the servant to lose such a mistress for so long; what, then, must it be to him who had been for years her inseparable friend, who had shared her fortunes, her poverty, her hopes and fears, and the sickness of sea voyages,—to lose her for whole weeks, hearing no tidings of her, fearing for her safety and health, and dread-

ing her alienation! Almost his joy in her return made him oblivious of the pain she must have felt in the suffering of her charming *protégé*, the good gardener, and the inconvenience of the London climate. Away! The world turns round. Yesterday we were in shadow, to-day we see the sun! Regard! Mister the parson and his amiable wife! . . . Observe the new English fashion. We raise our hat to the tall wife with the classical nose, and she raises her eyeglass and stares in response, whilst Monsieur her husband sees us not. Truly the good pastor looks only after his sheep.

M. de Gaillefontaine explained the reason of his presence in England, in disobedience to René's wish that he should represent her in her hôtel in Italy. It was thus. When her friends learnt that René had left Italy, they left also. Artists and musicians all deserted the saloon, and left

him, Antoine, alone in that vast solitude, to read ten thousand letters of apology and adieu. Some, with the pretext of sending their pictures to the Exhibition of the Royal Academy,—others, with the excuse of engagements at the Opera House in Covent Garden,—had followed René to London, and were seeking her, and, *ma foi!* dying of vexation and *ennui*. M. de Gallefontaine, like the intrepid child Casabianca, had stood his ground when all but him had fled; and, as a servant, there he had waited until he perished, had not the feelings of one more devoted than a servant impelled him to seek in England for some trace of his beloved friend. He had arrived unexpected at Riverford, hoping there to find his lamb *perdu*. Confusion! he found instead his Mister Fox taking tea with the housekeeper. Alas, even he knew nothing of the sought one! M. de Gaillefontaine

feared to enrage René, or he would have attempted to dispel his great fears by seeking her in London; and he remained in Riverford, growing hourly thinner. Twice had the tailor been called upon to make alteration in the vestments.

He stopped the landau on the hill that commanded a view of the house, and calling René's attention to the noticeable alterations, asked if she called to mind the hour when they stood at this very point, with nothing besides the boots they stood in, those being patched, but a few shillings in their pockets, and how he had prognosticated the very changes now realised.

The appearance of the house was entirely different. So much had been added that nothing of the flat box-like structure of the original was to be seen, and the building was now as light and graceful as it had previously been heavy and ugly. The

grounds too were altered. The long drive, flanked by the smooth lawn, that spread generously away to the outlying avenues, was untouched; but the ground about the house was broken up into terraces, upon which gardeners were yet working.

'Flowers and beauty and wit are yet wanting to make up the picture we drew,' said M. de Gaillefontaine. 'Nature with her flowers will be a month behind you with the other adornments.'

He watched René keenly, to see how her mind was affected by the changes he had made, and was delighted to see the animation in her face.

He had been tormented with a thousand fears that, removed from his influence, she would form opinions or accept a guidance antagonistic to his, and subversive of the plans he was making for the future. Her evident pleasure with the preparations made

for her reassured him. Cautiously, but in a light careless manner, he opened the subject of René's intentions, and found her quite prepared to occupy the English house at once. All M. de Gaillefontaine's care left him in a sigh.

Signor Borcatti, the famous decorator, had superintended the painting and furnishing of the house, and he conducted René through the rooms. Her interest grew to excitement as she passed from room to room and beheld the taste and beauty of the arrangements. Her progress terminated in the bijou theatre, a surprise for which she was totally unprepared. Again M. de Gaillefontaine looked in her face with the apprehensive curiosity of a guide who has brought his tourist to the highest ledge of the precipice. She was in a position such as probably no other girl had attained. He had taken a step which he would not have

attempted with one less adventurous and bold than René. There was but one meaning for René in all these arrangements, whereby the solemn country mansion was transformed to a gay palace, which was that in future she must be queen, and hold in England a court such as had astonished Italy. The theatre was not built for silence; the *fauteuils* not placed there to remain empty.

'This temple,' said M. de Gaillefontaine, 'I have raised in honour to your nobility. I have dared to do this on no authority but the knowledge of your high purposes. This shall be the birthplace of great works to live for ever associated with your name. Here shall genius unfold, and great minds reveal themselves to appreciative souls. And you, René Biron, shall rise amidst the fraternity of art — a sister who has united the wandering brothers,

and connected the chain of sympathetic souls!'

The colour heightened in René's cheek, and her eyes flashed, whilst something like exultant superiority dwelt in the curve of her smile. Her faith was somewhat shaken in the high ideals she had formed before her Bohemian experience in Italy, and she had a shrewd suspicion that M. de Gaillefontaine's eloquence was not more *con amore* than most speeches delivered on 'occasions;' nevertheless, she was pleasurably excited by the prospect suggested to her mind.

Mirth and flattery are not unenvied by older and sager ladies than she was. At any rate, the life presented to her imagination was preferable to a dull country life, and the society of a rude parson and his wife and their everlasting train of 'respectables.' Wit, music, art, all amid flowers

and sweet odours, and the enthusiastic admiration and gratitude of clever men—are not these good things, and worth the having? Why should René *not* accept them?

'When do you ring up the curtain, Mr. Manager?' she asked, with a smile.

The question was a sufficient intimation that she accepted the position, and M. de Gaillefontaine, relieved of doubt and anxiety, laid out his plans without hesitation. In three weeks it would be the first day of June, and by that time the gardeners promised that their work should be presentable. Then, also, the foliage of the trees, the verdure of the fields, would be perfect, and the air soft and warm. In three weeks it would be quite possible to arrange everything for a dramatic representation and the reception and entertainment of visitors. Yes, on the first of June the gates of Riverford might be thrown

open to the world of art, and René might assure herself that her visitors would find nothing wanting which should be found in one taking her high stand. Her faithful steward and good friend would answer with his honour for that. But in detail he must beg La Reine's assistance. For example: in the matter of genius. There was more of it at René's disposal than her steward with all his ingenuity knew what to do with. It was for René to select the individuals she would honour. Of instrumentalists, more desired to perform than could be squeezed into the orchestra; of vocalists, those who had offered to take leading parts were more than, compressed into a chorus, the stage would accommodate. More artists clamoured to paint scenes than could find place to stick a brush upon the limited spread of canvas. The English artists had sent a dozen comedi-

cttas for production, and every mother's son was capable and anxious of taking any part in anything. Nicolo Rococofoco had written an opera expressly for the occasion, and Botelli Piccallilo a cantata. Perhaps, M. de Gaillefontaine suggested, La Reine would like to read a few manuscripts before dinner; but René pleaded fatigue, and was not sorry to be left alone in the repose and luxury of a room scented with mignonette, where carpets and seats yielded to the touch, and the colour reflected from walls and furniture suggested early morning light.

Her maid brought a letter. The excitement of the last hour had thoroughly engaged her attention, and left her no thought for the past; but the letter brought back her previous sentiment, and she opened the letter hastily and turned to the signature with a quickened beating at her heart.

It was from her cousin. Hugh offered no apology for himself or explanation of his motives; he wrote merely in justice to Mrs. Reynolds, to assure René that her implied suspicion was ill founded and unjust.

René was unaccustomed to reproof, and felt inclined to be angry with her cousin for his short formal note, until she saw the injustice of making him the scapegoat of anger which she merited. Then she reproached herself; and the sense of unworthiness and feeling of dissatisfaction with her life returned to her, with all the questions they had presented to her a dozen times before.

She looked at the luxuries which surrounded her, and thought of the cold comfortless studio in Charlroy Street; of her cousin, who had given up all this which she enjoyed for freedom to work and de-

velop the good that was in him; of herself, who had given up nothing, who at her best could only select the variety of amusements most agreeable to her senses. 'I have the knowledge of right and wrong, and at least a suspicion that the life I live is wrong—a life of indulgence for which I should blame another. Am I not deceiving myself with words merely? Is not this encouragement of genius a sham and a lie? Am I not rather concerned in exalting myself? If I were sincere, should I not privately seek genius, and administer assistance with discrimination, rather than heading a raree-show, and throwing largess to charlatans no better than myself? Am I not practising falsehood in pretending a noble purpose and leading an existence which my conscience continually rebels against?'

At such times as these one noble course, open to the greatest and the least of women,

always presented itself to her: she could give her estate to a hospital, and herself become a nurse. The rectitude of that life was not equivocal, yet she shuddered to think of devoting herself to it. She would have avoided thinking of it, and for that reason could not avoid it; as one in a surgery finds himself unable to keep his eyes from the instruments which must presently be used. One condition suggested its reverse; and just as one, closing one's eyes upon a vivid patch of colour, finds on his retina a patch of the complementary shade, so she, shutting her eyes to her present mode of life, could see only its extreme opposite.

She saw no middle course between asceticism and frivolity.

'I had better be honest,' she said, 'and admit that I have no courage to be better than I am. What good does it do me or

others to pretend that my motives in spending money in the entertainment of artists are higher than those of mere self-indulgence?'

It was while looking at herself in the mirror the next morning that something like the truth flashed upon her—the truth that all her trouble arose from vanity, the idea that she was better than other girls, and must do something to attest the fact which other girls did not do. The fact dawned upon her that, after all, she was only superior to other girls in the matter of physical beauty. She had a moderate amount of intelligence, but nothing besides that—neither talent nor genius that she could trace.

A homely proverb came to her mind relative to a silk purse and an animal's ear; and she saw how profitless is the attempt to aspire to the condition of the great with

no faculties to raise one above the common. She sat down, thinking long and deeply, and the conviction grew stronger. The home indulgence, and later, the flattery and encouragement bestowed by her grandfather, the homage of all men—everything tended to raise her self-esteem unduly. It was the secret of her dislike and scorn for the girls of the ordinary type. But for her vanity she would not have exposed herself to her cousin's contempt and her own. What other errors yet more fatal might she not fall into, if she did not resolutely fix her eyes upon herself in her real character! There was a solace in this new idea.

She looked at her present position and grew hopeful; there was no reason for rash and desperate action. She could glean from the host which presently would be her guests such good and true friends as she wished to retain, and quietly exclude the

rest from further invitation. At once she might make friends with the families around her. Surely amongst a class renowned throughout the world for domestic virtues, kindliness, and hospitality, she would find the trustworthy counsellor and friend she had so frequently desired. But there was one surmounting charm associated with the new position which greatly reconciled her to rating herself with ordinary girls: it precluded the necessity of sacrificing all the pleasant things of life and most of its pleasures for the benefit of the sick poor. To distinguish herself by such a renunciation and against her inclination would be only less wicked, and not less vain, than to rule as a queen of gaiety against the whisperings of conscience.

She took breakfast in her own room, and ordered her mare for eleven o'clock, determined to begin work at once. There

was to be a steeplechase at Longmanshurst, and thither she would go, and renew her acquaintance with the people she had known before her departure from England, and through them obtain introductions to other families.

She sent no message to M. de Gaillefontaine, and as he had received no invitation to accompany her he was constrained to remain at home.

René's face at all times expressed her feelings, and M. de Gaillefontaine was not slow in deciphering expression; so he looked after René, as she rode away, cheerful and bright, with a puzzled air, and he asked himself, as he curled the sharp end of his moustache, 'What the devil is up now?'

Two hours later René returned; her riding-habit flecked with foam from the mare's mouth. She herself was trembling with passion; her large black eyes flashed

with indignation; and her lips blanched against her teeth. She smiled with a forced yet eager expression about her mouth as De Gaillefontaine hastened to meet her.

'Oh, I have had such a pleasant time of it!' she said, her lips twitching with scorn, and she smacking her whip against her habit. 'These fine gentlemen, these highly-bred aristocrats, these honourable men of England, all choose to ignore me, all except one who was good enough to insult me. Every one of them—men who have quarrelled for a place at my side—cut me, cut me dead, except the gentleman who was good enough to accompany me into the solitude of a lane, and—well, I cut him!'

She said this looking at her whip, her nostrils dilating, her lips quivering, as she recalled the insult she had suffered. Suddenly she stopped—they were alone—and catching the Frenchman's wrist, she said,

'Now, Antoine, you have been my friend, and I have thought too lightly of your friendship; befriend me again, and I will not be behind you in generous regard. These English gentlemen have insulted me; how shall I insult them, show my contempt for them?'

'Send out invitations to-day; exclude them; let them see the whole place alive with genius—'

'Yes, yes, yes!'

'Hurry the preparations. Have the grand *fête* in a fortnight—opera, mask-ball —on Sunday. Shock them, and show what you care for English respectability, how you despise them, my great, beautiful, grand René!'

CHAPTER III.

René was neither old enough nor bad enough to be vindictive. Her anger quickly subsided, and with calmness came the knowledge that she had been irrational, and that she alone was to blame for the treatment she had received. It was what she deserved, and what she might have expected had she considered the matter before, instead of after, her action. The quiet English families, judging her by their standard, were right in excluding her from their society. A girl with her notions and experience, however good her intentions, could not fail of spreading revolution wherever she went, though she desired the contrary. The admiration her beauty

elicited would cause plainer girls to emulate her slightest idiosyncrasy, and to assume a freedom of thought and action as disastrous to the general economy and as unbecoming to themselves as it would be were a flock of tenderly-nurtured geese of a sudden to leave their stubble and range themselves beside the eagles on the mountain-side. She realised, too, the possibility of her relations with M. de Gaillefontaine being misconstrued. The insult she had received proved the existence of an opinion derogatory to her strict morality.

These considerations induced her to respect the men who had declined to acknowledge her; they were acting up to their principle, and that principle was good. But though her anger against 'respectable' society died, her hope of joining it did not revive. She saw that there existed a wide chasm between her and this sober country

aristocracy which even a bold leap would not cross. She must continue an independent existence.

M. de Gaillefontaine admired women with devil in them. While she was possessed, he worshipped René, and forgot all about Giovanna Raffiolli. He did his utmost to stimulate that devil and encourage it to remain in René's bosom; and he was sadly disappointed to see it grow weaker and more flaccid day by day despite his efforts. She found that there was no necessity to hasten the *fête*—three weeks would be soon enough. She positively refused to have any performances held on Sunday. She would take a little part in the opera, and saw no objection to a fancy ball after. The actors could retain their costumes, and whoever chose to disguise his form and features might do so.

'It is a charity we should not deny some of our friends,' she said.

M. de Gaillefontaine was disgusted.

'Bah! she has too much of the English blood in her; she is but a baby, a chit, a *milk-shop*.'

But he did not fail to take an advantage that René in her haste had offered; and since that reference to increasing gratitude had been made his manner was altered appreciably. His eyes frequently, his manner constantly, professed a warmer regard than that of friend or steward. René noticed it with a sigh, and did nothing to check the demonstration. She was dull, and getting careless of herself.

'What does it matter?' thought she. 'No one better than he will be likely to want me. Why shouldn't I marry Antoine one day if he wishes? He has been a good and kind friend to me—no one better.'

The nearer one gets to the winning-post, the greater is the anxiety. His mind is far easier who has no chance of success. The hundred possibilities of accident are crowded together in the last steps. In M. de Gaillefontaine's case it was not alone accident he had to fear; his greatest apprehension was of a foot being purposely thrust out for him to stumble over. He had jealous eyes on him; there were two persons at least who would, if they could, prevent his doing as he pleased. Giovanna Raffiolli, for one, did not like the turn affairs were taking; she had detected the change in his manner of addressing René at the first rehearsal which brought them together. In a subsequent interview with him the Italian lady showed herself possessed of even more devil than De Gaillefontaine cared to see just then. But a woman's jealousy is always flattering to a

man; and M. de Gaillefontaine felt no very great concern for the danger threatened by Giovanna Raffiolli. He, in common with most of his countrymen, flattered himself upon his ability to manage women. It was Mr. Fox, silent and undemonstrative, whom he feared. He knew the old gentleman too well to believe him uninfluenced by circumstances.

As he had told René, upon his return to Riverford he found Mr. Fox taking tea with the housekeeper. The two men were perfectly polite, and, in a stroll they took together, each tried to get at the other's thought, and unriddle his observations. De Gaillefontaine discovered that Fox knew nothing of René's presence in England, and Fox learnt that she was not in Italy. Since that time Fox had not left Riverford: he spent the livelong day in gossiping. People were anxious to learn any facts relating to

the mysterious family arrangements of the Biron family, and Fox was eager for such information as was set in circulation by the servants of Riverford.

A bond of mutual curiosity existed between Mr. Fox and every soul in the neighbourhood whose temporal worth was under 500*l.* per annum. He was very popular with René's servants, from the housekeeper downwards; and M. de Gaillefontaine knew it. It is unpleasant to suspect the servants about you; but M. de Gaillefontaine could not avoid thinking that the chambermaids disarranged his furniture unnecessarily, and were in his rooms more frequently than duty required. To make certain, he filled up the holes in the tops of his keys with soap, and left the bunch on the floor, as if by accident. They were in the same place when he took them up at night-time; but every one showed that it had been used.

One servant was as bad as another; and had he discharged the whole service and engaged a new one, he would have felt safe only until the next morning brought gossiping tradesfolk to the house. He regarded every one about him as an agent of Fox, and knew well enough what was the object of his search. Equally, he was conscious that Fox must have heard the common reports which declared him to be René's husband, or her his mistress. With this knowledge, Fox's silence puzzled him. Every day he expected and hoped for a letter. The uncertainty of his dread increased his anxiety until at length it became unbearable; and he resolved himself to advance, and in a conversation to elicit, if possible, the intentions of his adversary.

He walked over the hill to the village, and turned leisurely towards the Ferry-boat, where Mr. Fox had apartments. Mr.

Fox was standing with his black-gloved hands behind him at the shop-door of the grocer's, admiring a side of bacon, and discussing its merits and the prospects of trade with the grocer.

Seemingly no two men were ever more delighted to meet each other than Mr. Fox and M. de Gaillefontaine.

'It is so long since we had our little chats,' protested M. de Gaillefontaine. 'Why should it be so? Why have you not done me the honour of to call upon me—you who call upon so many? It is not that we dislike each other, oh no! I can but admire, and you—'

'Oh, I declare I am even with you in that respect, monsieur, though I fear in none other. It is, indeed, the depth of my respect that forbids me to venture upon anything which might be considered as undue freedom.'

'You ravish me with your excellent grammar and your compliment. I come to take a drinks with our admirable Mr. Blake, and to breathe the beautiful air of the woods. Have you dined?—ah, *pas encore!* Eh, well, what say you, my good friend? Shall it be that you return with me, and take dinner in my apartments? I would have you see the preparations for our *fête* of next week.'

Mr. Fox spoke of a friend from London, who should be now waiting for him at the Ferry-boat, but signified his willingness to dine with M. de Gaillefontaine if the friend had not arrived. They separated—M. de Gaillefontaine strolling round to the front entrance of the inn, whilst Mr. Fox entered the side-door, and looked for his friend in the taproom.

There was but one man in the taproom, and he was seldom out of it in the daytime. This was the black sheep and scapegoat of

the village; a man who suffered for his own small crimes, and occasionally for those of which he was innocent. In the boating season he honestly earned what he could, and increased his revenue when occasion permitted by other means. How he got money for beer and tobacco when the season for boats was not, nobody detected; but when he had no money he was usually found with rabbits in a bag at night-time by gamekeepers. When luck was against him, he was content to go to the county gaol for a time, with the hope that Fortune would favour him upon his release. At these times he was careless of himself.

John Smith was the name he gave when questioned by the magistrate.

Mr. Smith slept; and to him Mr. Fox stepped hastily, and shaking him by the arm, whispered his name in his ear.

'Guilty, your honour,' replied John,

rousing himself. 'Beg pardon, sir; is it you?'

'Yes, yes. Now's the time! You know what to do. Quick! I'm going through Quarry Wood—slowly. You will take care of me, as I told you; but keep out of sight. You understand?'

'Don't you fear. I know how to keep out of sight. You're all right. You'll stick to your bargain—pound if I help you; two-and-six if nothing comes off.'

Mr. Fox hastily acquiesced, and then joining M. de Gaillefontaine announced that his friend had not arrived, and that he was free to accept the invitation. He would rather not drink before dinner, and if M. de Gaillefontaine would accept him in his morning coat he was ready at once to accompany him to dinner.

Riverford House is distant a couple of miles from the village by the carriage-road,

which winds round the hill, but rather less than a mile by the footpath that crosses it through Quarry Wood; and as this is the pleasanter walk of the two it is invariably taken, except at night-time, by pedestrians. After the two gentlemen had entered the wood, John Smith came from an outbuilding of the inn, whither he had gone to get his bag, which he kept concealed there. With this in his pocket he entered the wood, and made his way into its pathless recesses with as much alacrity as if the time was night and his object rabbits.

CHAPTER IV.

The ascent of the hill by the path which M. de Gaillefontaine and Mr. Fox took was steep, and tried the strength of the elder man.

'I am getting old,' he said, pausing and straightening himself with the back of his hand. 'When I was as young in the service of the Biron family as you, I was as active and brisk as you; but now—'

'Ah, it is a happiness when one can rest in the season for rest! It must be a great pleasure to you that you have nothing to trouble your mind at this time.'

'You are right, monsieur. The relief from care and anxiety is a blessing not to be over-estimated. What is better than

the *æquus animus* of one who has nothing to regret, nothing to fear? I have recovered my strength; shall we proceed?'

M. de Gaillefontaine offered the support of his arm, which Mr. Fox with smiling gratitude accepted, and they walked forwards—Mr. Fox with effort—slowly.

'I recall your observation,' said M. de Gaillefontaine presently. 'Your composure is a silent compliment to me, which I appreciate truly. Another in your position would trouble himself—my faith, would trouble me also very much at this time, hearing of these *canards*, which I am told are flying about.'

'Quels canards?' asked Mr. Fox, looking about innocently.

'The *rapports*, the rumours. It is said, I am told, that I am about to marry the Miss Biron.'

Mr. Fox laughed outright.

'Why, that nonsense is not worthy of belief! Some statements hardly deserve to be ranked as reports. If a newspaper boy told you that the Thames was on fire, you would not spend even a halfpenny to convince yourself that he lied. It is said that you are married to Miss Biron; and I would as readily believe that as the other absurd statement.'

'But why?'

'Because you are too clever, monsieur, to take such a step without consulting me. Those who make these statements, and those who believe in them, don't know you; I do. And you know me, and we both know Miss Biron. Of course it is possible that one day you will marry Miss Biron, but before that you will give up the half of the will you hold as an assurance that my annuity will be paid when you hold the property in your hands. Had I not known you so well,

monsieur, and not entertained so high an opinion of your sagacity; had I, in short, been a fool,—I should long ago have "troubled" you and myself, as you express it. I knew there was no occasion to enter into discussion upon the subject before matters were sufficiently advanced for you to speak. I should have been content to wait until next week or next month or next year, had you not chosen to open the subject before. I suppose it is with a view to some little arrangement after dinner that you are pleased to ask me to dine with you? Oh, my back! will you allow me to rest again?'

They had reached the top of the hill. A slight handrail runs beside the path for the protection of those passing at times when mist or darkness obscures the danger. The beech-covered hill that runs steeply yet gradually down to the river-side is here cut

away abruptly within six feet of the rail. It is one of several deserted quarries that pit the Berkshire bank of the Thames, and gives the wood its name.

Mr. Fox leaned his elbows and his back against the rail and breathed quickly.

'My breath is very short, and the hill tries me excessively. You don't know how weak and trembling I feel about my knees. Dear me, my breath. O Lord, O Lord! I should not have talked so much.'

'Will you sit yourself?'

'No, no, it's my breath chiefly; and this rests my back and my legs nicely. But I mustn't talk. Oh, dear; oh, dear, my breath—tut, tut, tut!'

M. de Gaillefontaine, after a few expressions of sympathy, became silent and drew out his cigar-case, looking sidelong at this weak, trembling, thin old gentleman, so helpless and fatigued in all except mental

function. In that he was as strong as, ay perhaps stronger than, M. de Gaillefontaine. Yes, this Mr. Fox could, and no doubt would, give his friend a good deal of trouble after dinner, and might make some unpleasant stipulations with regard to keeping silent. It may be thought that the revengeful Gascon was pleased to see the bodily suffering of him who could inflict inconvenience of another kind. But no such thought came within M. de Gaillefontaine's consideration. He was thinking how weak the support was upon which Mr. Fox rested, only strong enough to bear the weight of such a slight, fibreless old man. One good push would break it away and pitch Mr. Fox within a foot of the quarry's edge; and a kick with the foot would send him hurtling down to the rubble fifty feet below, and where would his power to annoy be then? A fall half that depth would

knock out the feeble spark of life from this decrepit body. And why should it not be knocked out, instead of smouldering on, giving light to none, but offence to M. de Gaillefontaine? What is the good of life to one so infirm that even a pleasant country walk is a pain? One ought to be thankful to have such an existence terminated speedily and without more than a minute's consciousness of the approaching crash, with perhaps no more than a moment's pain. Such an end were ten thousand times preferable to a lingering deathbed.

M. de Gaillefontaine slowly nibbled off the end of his cigar. What of all things he would have liked at that moment was a blow from Mr. Fox, or some sudden insult which called for personal violence. He, feeling so powerful and strong, had a repugnance to thrusting this old man through the fence and over the edge of the quarry

whilst his thoughts were so collected and his passions so still.

Yet he felt that now he had an opportunity which might never recur. The wind was high; there was plenty of noise amongst the swaying boughs; but down below there all was silent and still as a grave. Sound would be hushed in a pit so surrounded by growth. And the path they had traversed was empty, and to the foot of the hill on the other side no one was in sight. He moved to look down the path, and that brought him in front of Mr. Fox; and he looked at him as the cat in the fable must have looked at the mouse, whose partnership she wanted to bring to a close.

He rolled the cigar between his lips, nibbling the leaf nervously, and his heart began to beat and his breath to thicken, and he felt as one feels upon whom the determination grows to stake his last note on a card.

They had both been silent for two minutes, and Mr. Fox was breathing more easily. The opportunity was going; yet it should not—it must not. M. de Gaillefontaine felt that the slightest thing would give him just that modicum of impulse he wanted. A touch might do it. Almost without voluntary effort he raised his hand and laid it on Mr. Fox's right arm just above the elbow. Mr. Fox looked up into his face and trembled. Quicker De Gaillefontaine raised his other hand and gripped the left arm. For half a minute he stood thus, yet wanting resolution. Mr. Fox was white, his legs gave under him, his trembling body began to sink. Then the beast-like fury towards its escaping prey came upon De Gaillefontaine, and with a fierce short cry he thrust forward with his whole strength.

The rail was tougher than he expected,

and Mr. Fox more slippery. The old man seemed to slide inside his clothes; his arms were loose, and his body had no rigidity. He got his shoulders down to the rail, and his legs twined like a cable around his antagonist's. To stop were madness in M. de Gaillefontaine. He put out his whole strength and pushed forwards, but downwards, as Mr. Fox's position obliged him to do. The rail broke, but there were five feet of solid ground between the men and the edge of the quarry. M. de Gaillefontaine found himself hampered, for the old man's legs clasped his as if they had grown about him, and his hand had clutched him by the shirt-front and held him rigidly at arm's length above him. M. de Gaillefontaine struggled hand and foot, but not for long. Light was suddenly shut from his eyes and respiration rendered difficult by a rough bag that was drawn over his head and fas-

tened about his throat with a quick jerk of a cord that made him gasp for breath; the next moment a knee was thrust in his back, and his arms and his hands dragged from Mr. Fox. He was nearly choked by the tight cord about his throat; but in addition to that there was loose fur in the strongly-smelling bag, which got into his nostrils and throat with every inspiration. It was a giant that held him rigidly a few inches from Mr. Fox, whose furtive hands were quickly groping and feeling about the breast of his coat and waistcoat. He kicked and struggled to free his legs, but that flaccid, breathless old man had recovered his wind and muscle and did not give an inch. Next M. de Gaillefontaine felt the bosom of his shirt being torn, and then those long, cold, gloved fingers were touching his body.

Mr. Fox was not silent all this time,

but for one who had lately shown much exhaustion, he talked with surprising ease.

'I'm sure I'm very much obliged to you, my good man,' he said to John Smith, who had whipped the bag over M. de Gaillefontaine's head, and now held him fast. 'I don't know what I should have done had you not come to my assistance. I do think this French gentleman intended to hurt me, I do indeed; and it was very unkind, inasmuch as he asked me to dine with him, and he saw that I was fatigued and out of breath. If I can but get safely away from him, it will be all right. Oh, dear, see I've torn his shirt-front; tut, tut! It is all his own fault. I did not wish to struggle. Why, what is this you wear round your neck, monsieur—a little bag with something sewn in it? God bless me, this is very odd; here's the very piece of paper I've been hoping to find. How very strange to be

sure! It does not belong to you either, so you cannot blame me if I take it away. So. And now, my brave fellow, if you will just hold this gentleman until I have time to place myself under the protection of the police, I shall be very much obliged. Here is something for your kindness. As your hands are full, I will put it in your pocket.'

'Shove it in my mouth, governor,' said John Smith, who, holding M. de Gaillefontaine, did not command a view of his pocket.

'And now how long am I to hold this furiner?'

'Let me see: ten minutes to five, and the up-train is due at a quarter-past. If you will hold him for twenty minutes or half an hour, I shall be quite safe.'

John Smith nodded. Mr. Fox picked up his hat, brushed it with his sleeve, arranged his collar, and with the precious bag containing the half will in his breast-

pocket, quickly descended the path he had lately ascended with so much difficulty.

As soon as Mr. Fox was out of sight, John Smith began to drag M. de Gaillefontaine along the grass. He, finding the uselessness of resistance, had been passive since Mr. Fox had unclasped his clinging legs. But now he struggled more furiously than ever, and screamed as well as the bag and ligature would permit; for he had no doubt that it was the intention of the man who held him to drop him over the edge of the quarry to save further trouble.

'Hold your row,' whispered John Smith hoarsely, 'or over you go. I'll serve you just as you'd a-served the old man, s'elp me!'

'What do you want—money, watches? Take them, take them!'

'As a present?' asked John Smith thoughtfully.

'Oh, yes, my good mister; but spare my life.'

'Give 'em to me.' John Smith would not actually take them.

M. de Gaillefontaine with trembling fingers gave up his watch and money, and John Smith put them into his trousers-pocket, and said,

'Now look here. If you move to the right or the left, or backwards or forwards, you're a dead man. You sit there comfortable, and don't move a peg, or, by the Lord, I'll shove you over! Sit there till I tell you to take the bag off.'

M. de Gaillefontaine did as he was commanded, and hearing no sound he ventured, after the expiration of ten minutes, to raise his hand towards his throat.

'Drop it—put your hand down, or over you go!' cried the dreaded voice, that told him he was still watched. John Smith waited by him with the watch in his hand

until the hand pointed to five minutes past the hour, then he noiselessly withdrew, and got to the station in time to travel to London by the same train that carried Mr. Fox.

It was long before M. de Gaillefontaine dared to raise his hand again, and finding no objection raised, he speedily untied the knot and removed the bag, to find himself safely situated some yards from the quarry, but in a position where the growth of brier hid him from observation of any who might be passing by the path. No one was there to oppose his returning to Riverford.

He ate no dinner that day, and again and again his cigar went out, showing how deeply his mind was engrossed in the new aspect of affairs. And, indeed, these affairs demanded a grave consideration. How to avenge himself was a question of interest; but how to avert the calamity which impended was a far more serious problem.

CHAPTER V.

A CAB stopped in Charlroy Street towards the end of May, and there followed a thundering knock at the door of No. 30.

Hugh was working near the open window, and, looking out to see whether the visitor was known to him, he saw Charlie Brock. Hugh took the picture upon which he was working from the easel and turned its face to the wall. He set up a landscape, and had just completed the substitution as Brock, in his usual headstrong manner, burst into the room.

He asked a dozen questions without waiting for replies before he gave Hugh time to ask in return why he was so soon returned from Italy.

'So dull, my dear boy; nobody there now; couldn't stand it; not a soul to speak to excepting hotel *garçons* and dirty models. All right at first—lots of fellows, capital fun, the native all in his glory. By George, old fellow, your cousin must be a marvel! Introduced to her friend, M. de Gaillefontaine. Didn't see her—no one knew where she was; monsieur said she was indisposed. It's my idea he knew no more than the rest of us. Queer little fellow, monsieur; stands about that height; got a beak like this. Call him the marquis; but, by George, if appearance gives the title, he should be an emperor. All the boys mad about René Biron. I don't know how many portraits of her they have sent into the show, but leaves in Vallombrosa are not more plentiful. All manner of stories about her; some say she's married to the Frenchman.'

'Married!'

'Yes; and it looks like it too. He accompanies her everywhere, receives her guests when she is absent, holds the money bag, and kicks up independently all round. You know she has come to England?'

'Yes.'

'Well, she seems to be running as fast here as she ran in Italy—if not faster. What's the matter, old boy? You look as down in the mouth as though it were your money she is making ducks and drakes of. You had not any idea of marriage and shares in the estates?'

'No. But isn't it depressing to hear of a creature perfect in beauty "running fast" as you call it? A girl simply personally lovely seems to me as a sky would seem without stars, with nothing to tell of the mysterious beauty beyond, nothing to hope for, nothing to stir the soft low harmonies of our nature.'

Brock was quieted more effectually by Hugh's manner than if he had entreated him to be silent. He looked at his old chum suspiciously, wondering whether he had fallen into the clutch of religious fanatics, or whether he was 'sickening' for any malady. He turned the subject at once.

'I daresay you're right. Of course it is to be deplored that the best statues are only fragments,' he said. 'Haven't you begun work yet?'

'I've been at work a couple of hours.'

Charlie Brock looked into the picture he was seated before, and then held it sideways to the light; again looked at Hugh suspiciously, and then said,

'You clam! this pot-boiler is as dry as ever it will be. You sha'n't treat me as an outsider. I'll see what you've been working at before I leave the place, wherever

you may have hidden it. What do you mean by concealing your stuff like a great shame-faced gal?'

He was rummaging round the room and getting near the wet canvas. There was no avoiding discovery, so Hugh went to it, saying,

'This is the work. Hang me if I know why I should conceal it! Yet somehow an instinctive impulse leads me to conceal it whenever a fellow comes here. Don't you know what it is to feel in regard to certain things that they should be sacredly secret—things that you would not have vulgarised by common inspection, not subjected to thoughtless criticism?'

'I can't say I ever felt so about my own work; always been too poor to feel sentimental; but I can understand a fellow with deeper feelings than mine being jealous of other eyes seeing his work, and wishing like

a lover to keep his darling solely to himself. And I respect such a sentiment; and so, old chap, we won't look at the picture, after all; but we'll have a pipe and talk about the boys. The Native has two things in the Academy; you saw them, I suppose? He left Italy as soon as I got there; mad about your cousin, of course; going down to the kick-up next week. The Frenchman's forgotten to ask me, yet I told him I was a chum of yours. Have you heard of the affair? Just as unique and remarkable as the lady who gives it—operas, *bals masqués*, and all the rest of it. Jason and Lomax have been painting scenery for a bijou theatre; and from their description I should think the place is a Bohemian's paradise and nothing less. I came back last night. Didn't see you at the club. The fellows told me you were down on your luck, and less constant in your attendance there. I

shall come and sweep your cobwebs away; I have no studio yet. Are you working much?'

'Pretty steadily.'

'Landscape?'

'No, figure.'

'Who's the model?'

Hugh had the canvas upon the easel, and was touching up the background; Brock on the other side of the easel, smoking and wondering much at the silence of his friend.

'Come and look at my work, Charlie; perhaps you will know who my model is.'

Brock crossed to Hugh's side, and, as he caught sight of the portrait, exclaimed, 'René Biron! your cousin!'

'Is it like other portraits of her?'

'Yes; except in the expression. Others are vivacious, wild, daring; yours is altogether pensive, and almost sad. Her eyes

here look as though they were filled with moonlight; in all other portraits they are suggestive of volcanos and other devilish fires.'

'Then I have been more fortunate than other artists, who have not seen her more beautiful mood.'

'Is she sitting to you now?'

'No; she sat to me when I did not know who she was, at the time when she was missing from Italy.'

'That is consistent with the general account of her behaviour. What a mad little wretch she must be! And how did she discover herself?'

Hugh briefly recounted the particulars of the last interview, with anxiety to know what construction his friend would put upon René's behaviour. As he concluded, Brock exclaimed,

'Just like them; they're all as jealous

as cats with a mouse. And since that pretty little display you have seen nothing of her?'

Hugh shook his head as he laid aside his brushes with a sigh. He lit a pipe, and, turning to Charlie Brock, nursed his knee, and said,

'Now, Charlie, you shall be a listener, and I will do the talking. I will have it all out—all that has been constantly bothering my mind since that interview—ah, and before! It will relieve me as tears ease a woman's heart. I am in love with this girl; not in the ordinary way.'

(What man ever loved well who did not think his passion superior to any that ever before animated man's heart? was Charlie Brock's unspoken comment.)

'I love too deeply to make a heedless marriage, as most men do who are infatuated with a beautiful girl without reference to

the future. Knowing her no better than you and others know her, I would not marry her; knowing her as little as *I* know her, I would still not marry her.'

'Then your opinion has altered since the interview in which you made an unconditional surrender of everything.'

'My love has deepened. It existed then, but was overpowered by a grosser passion. The purer love is dominant now to the exclusion of baser feelings. I should not again debase myself and her.'

'According with my opinion — which most men would share. You said nothing which your cousin's behaviour did not justify. But perhaps you possess facts which are unknown to us.'

'I have been told things, certainly, which most people don't know,' said Hugh, with a light laugh. 'For example, I am told that he is not my cousin at all, but the daughter

of M. de Gaillefontaine; and that they are two adventurers who, knowing the particulars of my grandfather's family relations, imposed upon him.'

'Good heavens!'

'And I am told that Gregory Biron found out their duplicity, and, revoking his will in their favour, made another, leaving his property to me.'

'You are joking.'

'Not a bit. I've seen half the will—sufficient to make me believe that I am legally the possessor of Riverford; and I was told before René Biron, or whatever that girl's name may be, sat for me, that she would attempt to inveigle me into a marriage, in order to retain the position jeopardised by the loss of that half will, and a third party's knowledge of its existence.'

'Well, I cannot see how you square your pure love for the girl with a know-

ledge of these characteristic peculiarities. But possibly you don't believe what you hear.'

'Something of this I am compelled to believe. I have actually seen the half will which led her to visit me.'

'By George, it was a fortunate thing for you that her devilish jealousy got the better of her, or you might have been hooked! Phew! what a nice young party for a wife! But I am still puzzled to understand how you reconcile yourself to the belief that your love for such a girl is more than a mere sensual passion.'

'It is because I believe her to possess noble and beautiful feelings far outweighing the faulty dispositions of her nature. Every day that she sat here I saw in the expression of her face good contending with bad; and sometimes I incline to think that her last exhibition was not mere jealousy, but a

really virtuous indignation against me for what she considered a vicious pursuit of an innocent woman. It was that varying expression of her face which rendered me unable to make a definite portrait while she sat. This likeness I have painted in her absence, and from the memory of the expression that gave her face a beauty which none could see without worshipping. Look at this face, and tell me if that pure loveliness could dwell together with a soul of infamy.'

'My dear boy, I fear your love is common to most men who fall to physical beauty. What man, especially with poetry in his heart, converses with a beautiful woman and does not immediately invest her with virtues which she would blush to arrogate? Fortify yourself against this syren, not by closing your ears to her song, but by opening your eyes to her deformities,

and remembering that you are a man and a rational thinking animal. Keep your eyes upon her claws.'

'But look at this face—it is hers!'

'And differs as all must that are not from the life. It is bad work and untrue to nature, I'll swear. Why, how could you paint your memory of that face without giving to it the expression your fancy suggests? One might as well try to paint Guy Fawkes without his matches and black eyebrows. Couldn't do it. Undeceive yourself, Hugh, old man; and regard your feeling for this girl as no better than it is.'

'I would run my palette-knife into this painting that, morning and night, I sit before and love, if my feeling were not holier than you believe it. If I were not convinced that there is something to love in that woman, I would have done with this picture, and felt it my duty to get her

and all thought of her away from my mind.'

Brock looked at Hugh in silence for a few minutes, smoking and marvelling over the simplicity of the tall lean friend whose sweet kind eyes rested on his picture, and then he said,

'It is astonishing how thoroughly a man's disposition tinctures his works from the least to the greatest. In loving or painting you are the same. You take it into your head that all Nature is gray or brown or purple, and you will paint her complexion no other colour; and you take it into your heart that there must be a lovely soul behind the lovely mask, and nothing can shake your constancy. I am as vacillating as you are steadfast; but the same principle applies to me. I will alter my picture a dozen times in a day, in deference to the opinion of other fellows; and

I shall get to think René Biron an angel if I listen long enough to you, though common sense tells me you are wrong. Are you taking any steps towards recovering your property?'

'Oh, dear, no. The same voice that tells me I am heir declares my cousin an impostor, and I believe neither statement at present. Had I not seen René, the case might have been different.'

Brock insisted upon his friend dining with him, so Hugh left his picture without putting a stroke to it, and with a sigh.

In the evening Mr. Fox called at the studio, and was disappointed to find Hugh gone. He had sacrificed respectability to effect, and had disarranged his linen and the nap of his hat for an evidence of the desperate attack upon him. Moreover, time pressed. Every moment was of importance. He knew that De Gaillefontaine would not

passively submit to defeat. The woman of the house did not know Mr. Biron's private address; all she could tell was that he would probably be in his studio on the following morning about ten o'clock. Mr. Fox left his card, with, 'I will call to-morrow morning: my business is pressing and important,' written on the back of it.

CHAPTER VI.

Charlie Brock's kindness was wasted on Hugh. He did not enjoy the dinner, nor the wine, nor the conversation, nor the theatre: he would far rather have sat alone with his darling picture. His idleness made him eager to get to work again. He was at the studio by eight o'clock the next morning, to the astonishment of the woman of the house, who handed him Fox's card. He tore it up and threw it aside angrily. He wanted to hear nothing from evil lips of René. A convincing proof that he was heir to Riverford, and René the fraudulent holder, was the thing he most dreaded. Rather would he live for ever poor, for ever alone, if only he might believe in the purity

of his picture. This card robbed him of the enjoyment he had felt in coming again to his picture. It was like resuming the long, long journey after an assurance that the path is wrong. He placed the picture upon his easel, and his heart was heavy with the dreamy suspicion that he must alter the expression he delighted in. But as he looked, his love threw off the weight, seeing that the portrait was not a lie, but true to René; and faith getting the better of suspicion, he said to that beautiful face, 'I will believe you, though ten hundred men swear you false. Why should I believe any but you?'

Presently the postman knocked—it was the first delivery—and a letter was handed to Hugh. The envelope was square and large, and addressed with imperial flourishes. 'It is big enough to be an invitation to take tea with the Lord Mayor,' thought Hugh,

carelessly breaking the cover. He took out a card that was a work of art—French art, by M. Grevin—and represented Pleasure, with an apron full of roses, on one side, welcoming Art with a mask and lyre—both ladies of well-defined anatomy, with high boots and faces *chic* to a last degree. Between these allegorical ladies was an engraved invitation from René Biron to Hugh Biron to take part in a garden *fête* and *bal masqué* on Monday, June 1. At the foot, written in the same generous hand with the superscription, was the name of Antoine de Gaillefontaine.

Could René have sent it? was the first thought that the invitation brought to Hugh. The blood flowed quickly in his veins, and his fingers holding the card vibrated with each pulsation of his heart. Extravagant hope possessed him. René wished to see him. As he cooled, he ac-

counted for the invitation in a more rational manner. The signature proved that M. de Gaillefontaine had the disposal of the invitations; and Hugh concluded that this formal invitation was dealt to him in common with a hundred other professors of art. His relation to René would call for a special and private invitation from her personally, had he been singled for invitation by her.

Nevertheless, for all these cooler considerations, Hugh was too excited to settle to work: he sat with the card in his hand, and built air castles. While he was thus delightfully employed, Mr. Fox arrived.

Hugh would gladly have avoided an interview; but he felt that he had in some measure encouraged Fox, and he wished now to tell him of his altered feelings, and to close at once and for good all communication with him. He began to speak be-

fore Fox had unbent from his bow of salutation.

'Mr. Fox, I have little to say; but what I do state is emphatic and irrevocable. It is not worth while taking a seat, for I shall detain you for a very brief space, and I decline to enter into a discussion of the resolution I have taken and intend to abide by. Since our last interview I have seen my cousin, and formed an opinion of her entirely different from that which you encouraged. This conviction necessarily precludes my belief in any statement to her dishonour; and as such a belief alone would allow me to lay claim to the estate she owns, I am no longer interested in the recovery of the will you mentioned.'

'But you will remember, sir, I am sure —for nothing can subvert the honesty of your intentions, however your judgment may be betrayed — you will remember

that you encouraged me in procuring the will.'

'I remember that; I should have communicated my changed intentions had I known where to find you.'

'But still, sir, I have run that risk. I have ventured my life for your welfare, and in recovering that will I was within an ace of being murdered. You will remember your promise, which no after consideration should impel you to break, that I should not be a loser in a pecuniary way by any services in your behalf.'

'I promised that I would continue to pay your annuity of 150*l.* per annum upon the production of the will, and I intend to keep my word. Have you the will with you?'

'No. But though I required this assurance from you that I should not be a loser, I did not promise that you should

have the will for a mere continuance of my income—that gives me nothing for the danger I have undertaken.'

'That is sufficient, Mr. Fox. If you decline to let me have the will for the price I named, our contract is void. It does not matter to me who owns the deed: in any hands I shall not profit by it. And now—'

'One moment, sir. If I give you this will—'

'I shall assure myself that it has really been in the hands of my cousin—for I have only your word for this story; the will may not have been out of your possession since you wrote it and induced my grandfather to sign it—and if I find that you really have risked anything in my service, I shall, as I have said, pay you 150*l.* a year for my folly. I have said all that I have to say.'

Mr. Fox said he would consider the

matter, and withdrew. He was not unprepared for Hugh's refusal to put the will in force. He and M. de Gaillefontaine both knew of René's visit to her cousin: Mr. Fox learning it from the maid who accompanied her in London, M. de Gaillefontaine from René's own admission. Mr. Fox was not disheartened by Hugh's determination; he saw his income safe. It had not been while there stood a chance of René's marriage with De Gaillefontaine, or her discovery of the will's existence. At any time he could call upon the poor artist for 150*l.*, and he would, if a better bargain was not to be made.

He hurried to his apartment in Kingsland, anxious to get a letter posted to M. de Gaillefontaine by the mid-day post. It was Saturday. If he, M. de Gaillefontaine, got the letter by nightfall, his answer might reach Fox by the first post on Monday.

For fear of accidents, he directed the answer to be sent to the post-office in the Kingsland Road—a place near which was his apartment, and where policemen are within hail at most times.

CHAPTER VII.

M. DE GAILLEFONTAINE found his invention unequal to the danger which threatened him. He could not prevent Fox communicating with Hugh Biron; he did not know even where Fox was to be found: his only hope was that Hugh would decline to take the advantage offered him, or that he would delay correspondence with René until she had married him, Antoine, and made the property his beyond her power to surrender. It was not impossible that René would accept him for her husband; he saw that she was impatient of her present mode of life, and at times careless of what became of her. He knew that she liked her cousin, and had quarrelled with him; and

vain as he was, M. de Gaillefontaine perceived that her kindness to himself was due rather to pique than a warmer feeling. That made no difference to him; he did not love her well enough, and he loved himself too well, to be punctilious about trifles. It was necessary that he should take advantage of her mood, and establish himself before she recovered from her pique.

Impressed with the importance of immediate action, he determined at once to go and make himself agreeable to René. Five minutes' attention to his appearance satisfied him, as he looked at himself in the glass, that he was good enough for anybody; a reflection that brightened his spirits, and made it easier for him to conceal the anxiety he felt.

'Who would think that three hours ago I sat myself with my head in an abominable bag?' he thought.

In the hall he passed Walters, the coachman, standing hat in hand.

'Why do you wait?' he asked.

'Going to London, sir. Waiting for a letter mistress wished me to post there.'

'Where is Miss Biron?'

'In the libery, sir.'

He passed on to the 'libery,' and found René seated before a desk.

René addressed him directly.

'I have been looking down the list of invitations,' she said, 'and I find that my cousin's name is not down. Will you be good enough to fill up a card of invitation, and give it to me now? Walters is going to London to-night, and he will post it there. I should have spoken about it before.'

She purposely kept her eyes on the list as she spoke, but De Gaillefontaine noticed the rising colour in her cheek, and his

hopes fell. He knew not what to do; hardly could he stammer a few apologetic words.

'There is no need of apology,' said René; 'the fault is entirely mine. You do not know his address even.'

She touched the bell, and Walters appeared. De Gaillefontaine was filling up the card. René handed an envelope, and noted the agitation which no effort of his could conceal. She was touched with a spirit of mischief, and enjoyed his trouble, thinking it the result of jealousy, and little knowing how far more profound was the emotion that blanched her friend's cheek.

She dictated the address, and saw him biting his lip as he wrote. Looking at the address she found he had mistaken the number, and herself corrected it, pardoning the poor wretch on account of the feeling she had produced. Walters took the letter,

and shut the door behind him. The closing of the door suggested a sensational tableau for a St. Martin drama—the villain finding the magazine door closed upon him after he had fired the slow match!

He tried to control his feelings, he tried to appear calm and happy, he tried to talk; and his failure was more interesting to René than success would have been. No woman is proof against the enjoyment of a man's misery if she thinks he loves her, and she has made him wretched; and this belief, which should move her to tenderness and pity, usually incites her to provoke the distress of her victim. Her gaiety increased with M. de Gaillefontaine's depression, for he could by no effort divest his mind of the consideration of the danger threatening him, and she laughed when he left her with no better pretext than a headache. It was so odd to think of this funny little fellow

being jealous upon her account. She had looked upon him so long as a guardian, almost a paternal friend, a servant, that his new part, by its very novelty, seemed ludicrous. But this joke had its grave side for René; there was no mirth in her countenance when the thought passed through her mind that this man might be her husband. He had proved himself a good friend, and might make the best of husbands, and possibly the wisest and best thing she could do was to marry him; but the thought was repugnant to her. Marriage with him was almost as deadening to think of as that other wisest and best last resort—becoming a hospital nurse.

From M. de Gaillefontaine and the gloomy future with him, René's mind turned to Hugh Biron, and at the same moment she felt as though she had cast aside a pall, and saw again the light of

young life. Refreshing hope reanimated her. She was almost ashamed of the longing she felt to see Hugh and hear his voice. 'One would think I love him,' she thought, her cheeks burning with the words.

Neither caprice nor mischief had actuated her in inviting her cousin; the idea had come to her as the result of the desire continually felt to know how Hugh regarded now the model for whom he had carried spring flowers: what were his thoughts of René Biron; what kind of feeling he had for his cousin. Accident suggested a stratagem by which she might obtain the knowledge she desired, and she had resolved at once to put it in practice, relying upon the formality of the invitation to conceal the special interest she had in his coming.

Leaving her, M. de Gaillefontaine went once more into the grounds, trying to re-

solve upon a course of action. He walked up and down, lighting one cigar after another, and throwing them away with a curse as he found them gone out. He went to his room, and sat there in the dark with his head in his hands; he threw himself upon the bed, and lay there without sleeping, and without obtaining a solution of the difficulty before him.

He had no doubt of the use to which Fox would put his possession, and he knew René's temper well enough to be certain that she would give up every farthing of her property the moment she found it not legally hers, and without any consideration for the welfare of her true friend Antoine. A great change in his fortunes was imminent. Before he had been happiest, at such times feeling that any change must be for the better; now it was otherwise. He had lived fat, and had no relish for the small

beer and cheese-parings of a fencing-master. The penniless, vagabond, careless life had no charms for him now. Vagabond and careless he could be again without regret, but penniless—oh, no!

He was not jealous of Hugh, but simply hated him with the hate of a thief for the man he has failed to rob. He was jealous of Mr. Fox; and as his imagination pictured the execrable Fox entering in triumph the grounds and building he had prepared for himself, his vengeful breast was inflamed with a yearning to exercise his lawless will to the full. He would like to set fire to the place and hurl his enemy bound into the midst. He was careless whether René loved Hugh or not. He would willingly have married René—and would now, were it possible—but he did not love her; he preferred Raffiolli—reason the more that he should make René his wife.

When he lit the gas he opened his desk, took out a roll of bank-notes and told them over; they were the careful savings of his stewardship. He wrote the sum on a slip of paper, and opened his cheque-book. It contained a cheque in discharge of the building and alteration expenses, which the architect had not yet received. It was signed by René, and made payable to the architect or 'bearer.' The amount of this cheque M. de Gaillefontaine wrote under the other figures, and adding them together found a total which drew from him a sigh of relief. 'Anyhow,' he said, 'you shall not be a pauper, Antoine.' Like a wise general, he prepared for defeat.

The following morning, at the moment of returning from sleep to consciousness, when fact and probability mingle in the mind, M. de Gaillefontaine saw a desperate alternative to quiet defeat. His imagina-

tion figured two men engaged in a fight to the death. He with whom De Gaillefontaine's sympathy lay was being worsted, and was powerless to parry the vigorous cuts of his adversary. Inglorious unavenged defeat was before him; his foe was nerving his arm for the *coup de grâce.* M. de Gaillefontaine struggled to advise the doomed man. At least he might try to kill, or die with the savage satisfaction of having mortally wounded, his conqueror. M. de Gaillefontaine, with an effort, cried out, 'If you can't parry, thrust!' and awoke.

The scheme contained in this half-sleeping fancy suggested not only a desperate end, but also the means to be employed. He lay quietly modelling the crude idea until it took a form that pleased him.

'After all,' he thought, 'it is not Fox I should deal with in the first instance; it is

this Hugh Biron, who threatens me and drives me to extremity. If he were away, I might laugh at Fox, and enjoy the defeat entailed by his own folly. And surely at this ball I can find means of quarrelling with this young man, and in my own self-defence get rid of him. These English can fight only the box.'

He arranged his plans systematically and in sequence:

'1. To offer myself to René.

'2. If she accepts me, to prevent any communication between her and her cousin or Mr. Fox; without violence if possible.

'3. If she declines to take me or postpones her decision, to find Hugh Biron and silence him.

'4. If H. B. refuses to fight with the rapier, to secure my property and bolt immediately, with the Raffiolli—or without her.'

The possibility of having to resort to the last expedient was the occasion of his going to Reading that morning with a portmanteau. He had written to René's banker there to prepare for a heavy demand; and, knowing him, the clerk paid out the amount upon the cheque drawn for the architect in notes and all the gold he had at command. With this M. de Gaillefontaine returned to Riverford.

There was plenty of occupation for M. de Gaillefontaine during the day. The arrangements for lighting the grounds, the erection of pavilions, the *cuisinerie*, all received his supervision. Visitors and luggage arrived: the visitors chiefly Italian and German ladies and gentlemen, swarthy mostly, all muffled to the eyes; their luggage, music, and instruments in important cases, and clean linen in the smallest and

most unpretentious carpet bags. There was yet to be the final rehearsal of the new opera, and these visitors had come on Saturday for Monday. They knew the wine, and were fond of billiards.

In the evening Mr. Fox's letter was handed to M. de Gaillefontaine. Turning to the signature he apologised to his friends, and left them.

In his letter Mr. Fox stated his intention of selling the document now in his possession, and desired to know whether monsieur would purchase it at a price commensurate with the personal inconvenience and mental anxiety it had entailed upon its possessor.

The address he gave made it impossible to communicate with him before Monday, the day of the *fête*. After some close thinking, M. de Gaillefontaine sat down at a desk and flourished his reply to Mr. Fox.

'My esteemed and respected Friend,—I acknowledge an equality, and I give the hand. Accept my compliments. You should have been a Frenchman. With respect to your obliging letter and your magnanimous offer it is that I write.

'One of your genius must be aware that the value of the document you hold depends less upon the risk you ran in securing it than upon its value to me; is it not so? It is of course a trumpery if it you have communicated to any one—to Mr. Hugh Biron, for example. That you would think to defraud me by selling a deed which Mr. Biron refuses is a foolery for which I cannot believe that you are so capable; wherefore I shall be glad to buy it of you straight.

'We make a little *affaire* here on Monday, June 1, and I enclose an invitation for you and your good friend; he who so skil-

fully assisted you on a particular occasion of the past. With this companion at your side, amongst many who would prevent an act of violence, and with my assurance that for a week I will regard you as the friend of my bosom, you may assure yourself of perfect safety. It will be all right, truly.

'It is presumption to offer advice to one who has shown himself so capable of to take care of himself, yet I would counsel you to wear a mask and disguise your appearance, as Mr. Hugh Biron will be present, and might recognise you.

'To business. If it is that we find at the departure from the *fête* that Mr. Biron has not said to Miss Biron anything of which we speak now, I will then purchase this paper of you at once.—I have the honour to be, respected sir, your friend,

'De Gaillefontaine.'

M. de Gaillefontaine was proud of his letter; in correspondence at least he felt himself infinitely superior to Fox, and this consciousness of worth elated him.

No vain man can ever be long unhappy. He regards himself, and cannot but be hopeful with such a vision of promise. His vanity is the precious alchemy by which the leadenest possibilities are turned into golden probabilities. He looks at himself and his work, sees good in everything, and rejoices.

But it was not vanity alone that caused M. de Gaillefontaine to exult. The danger of his position excited him; and his love of show and display was gratified by the theatrical circumstances of the *coup* he was to make. On Monday all the characters would be upon the stage; if he remained upon the scene it would be as the central figure; if he were obliged to leave he would

quit with *éclat*, and his absence would be marked like the disappearance of a sun from a system.

On Sunday he was brilliant. René was not surprised at the change in his demeanour. It was unusual for him to be sad, and an exuberant flow of spirits might be simply a counteraction. She had a suspicion, moreover, that his demonstrative gaiety was intended to conceal the concern he felt on account of Hugh, and to forestall him in the possession of her regard. Indeed, had she not been amused, she must have been embarrassed by his constant attention to her. He was tender and sentimental when he had opportunity; he gave up a game of billiards; he neglected Raffiolli on her account.

Giovanna Raffiolli would not submit to unexplained neglect.

'Look, my marquis,' said she to him,

when, in the twilight, he allowed himself to be sentimental to her, 'I should very much like to know all that you have not told me.'

'What is that? Have I not told you everything—more than Samson told Dalilah? Hold you not my life, my fortune, in your hand? I have told you of this Fox, of my adventures and perils.'

'Yes; but you say nothing of our queen. You do not explain this tenderness which has grown since we were in Italy together.'

'Did I not incur her anger? My God, it behoves me to make myself agreeable, or—phew!—"M. de Gaillefontaine, we can dispense with your service; you have been very good to me—very clever in your endeavours for my prosperity, but—you can go!" Eh! it is time I behave myself.'

'My marquis—you so clever, so sage—has it not appeared to you, knowing our

queen's purity, that when she finds people talking of your tenderness, your sweetness, your languishing, she will see that one of two things she must do—either she must marry you or give you this discharge from her household, which you so much dread?'

'Ah, you do me the honour to be jealous!'

'Of my interests assuredly. Antoine, I like our queen too well to be her rival if she married. Again, I am enamoured of these quiet English homes, and should prefer, to any other arrangement we could make, to marry and settle down, as you proposed when you laid out to me the affairs of your life.'

'I will not encourage your jealousy!' cried monsieur playfully. 'I will tell you nothing at this moment of my plans as a punishment of your wicked doubt. But this you shall know: I am preparing for

flight. On Tuesday morning—possibly to-morrow night—I may come to you and say, "Take the seat beside me in this carriage at once; put these notes in your bosom: they are yours, if I am caught; if I escape, they are ours."'

With these words, he left her; partly for the sake of effect, partly to avoid further question. But Raffiolli was not satisfied.

'"*May*,"' she said; 'why not "*shall*"? Is it that you will take me only if René refuses, eh? This must be found out.'

CHAPTER VIII.

The picture which had been drawn for René, when she stood penniless outside the Riverford estate, was completely realised on the day of her *fête*. Her home was a bijou palace springing from a bed of flowers, and she stood there to welcome a hundred guests, each distinguished amongst men for talent, if not for genius. All that M. de Gaillefontaine had promised was fulfilled, and more. Nature assisted his success, and supplied what his ingenuity could not command — tender breezes and a blue sky dappled with pearly cumulose clouds. It was sufficiently warm for the southern visitors to remove their comforters ; for others to enjoy the cool shade

of the rustling beeches by the river's edge.

Where René went men and women clustered, each newly-arrived guest anxious to renew acquaintance with the *bella regina*, and render the tribute of wit stored expressly for her ear. Yet somehow she was not elated as she had been by the ovations in Italy. Her friends were very witty, very flattering, very nice; but they did not engross her thought and exalt her above her 'everyday' condition. While listening to a remarkably good thing that Hall said to Biddel, when he went to Burlington House for his rejected pictures—it was the twentieth good thing she had heard since mid-day — she found herself wondering whether that other English artist had any pictures hung in Burlington House, with a curious feeling of hope, as if it were a matter of interest to her whether he was successful

or not. She heard a laugh at the conclusion of the story, and she herself laughed; but she was conscious of her hypocrisy, for at the point of the story she had been speculating as to the time that tall artist with the bent shoulders would come, if he came at all. Certainly she looked forward, with an eager throbbing at her heart, to night-time. The stratagem she had arranged was hazardous and bold, and in itself enough to account for the excitement she felt.

M. de Gaillefontaine was like a boy on the 5th of November who has squibs to let off. His intense delight in displaying himself upon the stage of that theatre he had raised, before the audience for whom he had prepared it, made the vital business which was to follow of almost secondary importance. He ate nothing at dinner, and lost his temper with the cooler professional

artists, who preferred lingering over the sweets to 'making-up' before the necessary hour.

Within the last week René had resigned the part she had accepted in the little opera, excusing herself upon the ground that it would be in better taste for her to take a place amid the greater number of her guests in the auditorium.

But Giovanna Raffiolli explained the matter differently among the ladies, who were less mad in their enthusiasm for René. She pointed out the singular likeness of her voice to René's, which similarity must challenge comparison, wherein René, wanting the cultivation and technical management of Raffiolli, must be ranked second. 'And the queen is prudent, and will not risk the supremacy she enjoys.'

Indeed there was a very singular similarity in the voices of these two, and it was

this similarity which made René throw up her part; but for a very different reason from that imputed by Raffiolli.

And so she sat with the audience, changing her place between the acts and looking round upon her friends. Once the colour came to her cheek. Hugh, standing so far from her, could not surely see that change of complexion, yet the effect upon him was as if he had. René would have been thankful for a mask.

M. de Gaillefontaine played as if born to the stage. It is true his voice was weak, and of limited compass; but his superb carriage and manner concealed such a trifling defect. A turn of the body, or a bow, overcame the most difficult passage, and the high notes were expressed by a shrug of the shoulders or a kiss of the hand. He was superb, and that is the fact.

The opera was played first; and while

the comedietta was being enacted M. de Gaillefontaine ordered the lighting of the grounds and the pavilions. Giovanna Raffiolli coming to René, a place was made for her.

'I want you to come to my room privately, without telling any one,' whispered René, when occasion offered.

'I will accompany you when this farce is over, if it will ever end.'

The comedietta did end; and after a time of conversation those who had to dress for the masquerade withdrew, and René, with Raffiolli, made her way towards the door. Her breathing was thick and difficult; there was nervousness in her manner, and her eyes lacked their usual fearless glance as she looked from friend to friend with the timidity of a schoolgirl. At length the expected figure stood in her way, and the deep thoughtful eyes were

upon her. He was not to be evaded, this tall cousin: he held out his hand.

René had resolved to look him calmly in the face, and say a few words of welcome, if it should happen that they met before she had assumed her mask. But as she felt his smooth soft hand close upon hers, a great hope that this man was good and true—a great yearning to have such a good and true friend to guide her and keep her from doing foolish things—came upon her, speaking through her eyes to those that questioned her, but silencing her tongue.

How earnestly his eyes did ask her whether she also were good and true! And feeling how she had merited to be thought other than good, her eyes fell in shame as she passed on.

That silent greeting was not lost upon Giovanna Raffiolli; she long ago had been

questioned thus, and the memory of it filled her with sadness. She once had loved a man who questioned, and to whom she could not lie. Taking René's arm, she pressed it to her side, and they went silently to René's room.

M. de Gaillefontaine saw the cousins, and noted the particulars of the meeting.

'Are you sure that is he?' he asked of the servant beside him in a low voice.

'Certain, monsieur. I took his card—here it is, and have kept my eyes on him, as you ordered, ever since. Shall I still watch him?'

'No; leave him to me. Do you know if the other man has come yet?'

'Mr. Fox?'

'Sh! yes.'

'Not when I left the gate an hour since. Williams I left to look out, and I have not seen him.'

'Go and see. Let me know when he arrives himself.'

M. de Gaillefontaine looked at Hugh and measured him with a swordsman's critical half-closed eye, his nostrils expanded, his lips closed to his teeth. He took a long inspiration and turned away. He should know that awkward figure anywhere, and should not fear him with any weapon but a cudgel.

René bade her maid leave the room, and, when she was alone with Raffiolli, spoke.

'You and I are nearly of a height.'

'You have the advantage.'

'Imperceptible, if you wore *bottines* Louis Quinze and I a man's shoes.'

'Truly.'

'Our voices are exactly alike.'

'But the accent is different.'

'Not if we speak French. Your French has the Gascon pitch of mine.'

'I also am of Gascony. What you say is true.'

'Supposing we wore masks, could your dresser so paint the lower part of our faces that our identity might be mistaken?'

'Identity! that means that one shall say that I am the *bella regina* and you simple Giovanna Raffiolli.'

'Yes. Never mind about compliments —is it possible? Besides the mask, a moustache and little beard would aid the deception. See! here are two dresses. This mediæval robe of white velvet I intend to wear at once. I shall remove my mask that all may see who I am. I want you to wear this Spaniard's dress, and unmask, that M. de Gaillefontaine at least may know you.'

'I understand.'

'When we can, I desire to withdraw, to change dresses, I making up as the Spaniard

Giovanna Raffiolli, you as the mediæval princess René Biron, and, so disguised, to return to the company masked. Then I wish you from that time forward to sustain my character, to listen to my friends, to entertain them; but to those who know me well to speak as little as possible and in French. Will you do this to oblige me?'

'It is but a poor thing to do, but I shall do it as joyfully as a greater. Depend upon me to sustain the character. Will you send for my dresser at once?'

This arrangement fell in entirely with the wish of Giovanna Raffiolli. She had a suspicion that Antoine would, if he could, deceive her and marry René. Her disguise would enable her to test his honesty of purpose and possibly to revenge herself.

The dresser accommodated Raffiolli with an incipient moustache and imperial, and declared that in appearance and voice she

would pass for the young tenor, Bossi. A long cloak was fastened over her shoulder and a rapier hung by her side.

René's dress could not fail to attract attention, and seemed designed with that view. It was an elaborated Flemish dress of the fourteenth century, which displayed rather the gorgeous fabrics of which it was composed than the symmetry of the wearer's figure.

The seats had been cleared from the theatre, the musicians were upon the stage, and M. de Gaillefontaine with a crowd of visitors lounged near the proscenium, waiting for René to open the ball.

She entered unmasked upon the arm of Raffiolli, whose face was concealed; the hum of voices subsided, and all eyes were turned upon René and the young Spaniard as they entered upon the open space and the orchestra struck up.

René bowed and took her place with Raffiolli for her partner. Until Signor Bossi was discovered without a mask, it was thought that the young Spaniard with whom René danced was he. De Gaillefontaine then was troubled. Could the fool of a servant have mistaken, and was this young Spaniard no less than René's cousin? The thought carried with it to him the apprehension that his only course after all was to 'bolt with Raffiolli—or without her.'

At the end of the dance he made his way to René, and was accepted for the next quadrille.

'They did not waltz when they wore dresses of this kind,' said René in Gascon French.

Still with Raffiolli she wandered amongst her guests, replying in monosyllables to those who addressed her. She looked fear-

lessly for Hugh, now that her face was masked; she passed him, and he saw that her eyes were upon him, but he did not join the throng which, like the nebulæ of a comet, surrounded and followed her in her passage, and she liked him the better for it.

'May I ask who the young hidalgo is whom you honoured with the first dance?' asked De Gaillefontaine, when at length he stood alone by René in the quadrille.

'Would it be fair of me to tell?' asked René.

'Not in any ordinary case, or why should masks be worn? But if this was your cousin, I should feel bound to exercise more complaisance towards him than to another in his position.'

'Do you mean you would be less jealous?'

'Mademoiselle, it is the hand, not the heart, that I control.'

'Well said.'

'But my question?'

'Well, I think my hidalgo can defend himself, so I will admit that he is not my cousin.'

M. de Gaillefontaine was relieved.

'Another question. Why is it that you speak nothing to-night but the French? Is it that you dislike the English, or that your heart turns kindly to the Gascon?'

'O monsieur!' exclaimed René softly, as she left his side for the chain.

M. de Gaillefontaine saw the smile on her lips, and was over-joyed. After all she might accept him, and lessen his difficulties and increase his pleasures immeasurably.

René, incited to mischief by the hazard of her position, was laughing to think what fun it would be if he should make Giovanna Raffiolli an offer of marriage when their costumes were changed.

'May I have the pleasure of showing you the illumination of the gardens?' asked De Gaillefontaine, in a voice trembling with something like emotion.

After a moment's downcast silence, René said,

'Not now. I must see to my visitors in the house; but—but—but afterwards.'

'O my friend, my—'

'Eh?'

'It is now midnight—an hour's time—one hour. The arbour by the boat-house.'

'Is it *very* dark?'

'It is of a beautiful darkness. There is light to see the beauty of your face when your eyes shall shine there. May I hope that you will be there?'

René nodded and left him. In her room she found Raffiolli already preparing for the new character. Moustache and im-

perial were removed, and her hair made up in the manner of René's.

'May I ask why the queen laughs?' she asked, as René, shutting the door, broke into rippling laughter.

In a few words she explained the matter, and the appointment she had accepted.

Then Signora Giovanna Raffiolli laughed louder than René. Gaiety of the demonstrative kind was the only concealment for the rage that dwelt in her soul.

'Shall I accept the wretch?' she asked.

'Oh, as you please; but don't betray me. Speak the Gascon. Of course your bashfulness will permit you to speak only in monosyllables. And now, dresser, quick, or we shall never be ready in time!'

CHAPTER IX.

René and Raffiolli reëntered the theatre together, in their reversed characters—of course masked. When they separated, M. de Gaillefontaine, passing to the side of Giovanna Raffiolli, now dressed in the mediæval robes lately worn by René, whispered,

'It is one less a quarter.'

'I do not forget,' half whispered Raffiolli, in Gascon French.

Her eyes flashed a glance from the mask that thrilled De Gaillefontaine.

'She has the devil in her, after all,' he said.

A servant touched his arm, and said,

'The two are outside—Mr. Fox and his friend—and wish to see you.'

'Where? Show me—quick!'

Time pressed, and De Gaillefontaine followed the servant hastily from the theatre to the terrace, where stood a pantaloon holding the arm of an Irishman, who held a very respectable blackthorn under his arm.

'My good Fox, welcome!' said M. de Gaillefontaine, addressing the pantaloon when he had dismissed the servant. 'And this is your friend, to whom I am indebted of a bag? You have the papers amongst you?'

'That's all right, guv'nor,' said the Irishman, with an assuring nod.

'My friend is quite correct,' said pantaloon Fox.

'If you meet me here in an hour, and will part with that paper for a reasonable

sum, I shall buy it; if not—' A significant shrug. 'In my absence you can visit the buffets, if you would have refreshment.'

'We will be here punctually.'

'In an hour, you said, cocky?' asked the Irishman.

M. de Gaillefontaine bowed, and returned to the theatre shivering with excitement.

Near the entrance stood the young Spaniard who had excited his curiosity. He had shrewd suspicions, in consequence of his inability to discover Giovanna Raffiolli amongst the masquers, that she was concealed in that Spanish dress, and drew near without attracting attention. The hidalgo was leaning against a pillar, looking at the masked lady in the mediæval robes, one hand upon his hip. De Gaillefontaine whispered,

'Giovanna Raffiolli should conceal her

lover's ring if she wishes to avoid recognition.'

'Perhaps that is why she gave it to me,' answered René, speaking low, and with the peculiar accent of Raffiolli in speaking English.

M. de Gaillefontaine laughed.

'I recognise the voice, though you lower the key, and I notice that the hair upon your chin has not grown there. Ah, Giovanna, you cannot deceive one that loves you.'

He pinched her hand and left her. René wiped her hand with a handkerchief, and went into the open air. Hugh had passed her twice as if anxious to speak, without having a pretext.

She was prepared to act up to her part, and had a cigarette in her lips as she saw Hugh coming from the theatre-door. She put her cigarette-case in her pocket, and

began feeling in the others and stopping there.

'*Peste!*' she exclaimed, as Hugh advanced; and then, as if suddenly seeing him, she said, speaking with a strong accent, 'Have you a cigar-light, signor?'

'No,' said Hugh, with a laugh, 'I honour Vandyke by carrying nothing more modern than a pipe in his pocket. But we can get a light from one of these little lamps.'

'Ah—so! Will you do me the honour to accept a cigarette? It is a very great delight to breathe the fresh air after the heat of that theatre, don't you think?'

Hugh assented absently, and said,

'I am wondering whether we have met before—your voice is familiar.'

'Ah, this voice of mine is a curious voice. One tells me it is like Raffiolli's; another says it is Edouardo Bossi's; and yet another tells me it is like La Regina's.'

'But there is the resemblance.'

'Yes, I hope there is something of manly strength in my tone, to—to balance —to equal—to make up—to compensate the absence of the sweetness that makes La Regina's voice perfect.'

'I am content with your voice at its sweetest. No doubt it will grow deeper. You are young.'

René fingered her moustache, and admitted that she was not old.

'Won't you find it easier to smoke without your mask?'

'It is sewn to my wig,' said René; and, turning the conversation, continued, 'You did not arrive until to-night?'

'I arrived about nine.'

'Then allow me to show you the grounds —will you permit me?'

It tickled Hugh that this bumptious young foreigner should show him the grounds

in which he long ago played as a child. But he was glad to have for a companion one who might know and probably would say something of René, possibly confirming his hopes of her truth; besides, it was charming to him to listen to the music of this voice, so like hers; and so he cheerfully accepted René's proposal.

René slipped her hand under his arm, and a thrill of pleasure tingled in her veins with the touch. For a moment she was overcome by an indescribable emotion. She felt that if she spoke it must be in unfeigned accents; that if he questioned, she could hide nothing from him, but tell more than she had ever whispered to herself. Why should this feeling affect her all so suddenly? Her fingers did but rest upon his arm lightly as rose-petals. A wire resting as lightly upon an electric battery might burst an ironclad.

Calmly unconscious of her emotion, Hugh sauntered by René's side, enjoying the fresh night-air, the smoke, the thoughts conjured up by his companion's voice. They came upon the arbour by the boat-house, where René had appointed to meet De Gaillefontaine. No one as yet was there. Hugh stopped, and looking about him with a puzzled air, exclaimed,

'Why, the boat-house has been moved!'

'How is it that you know that, who came here not until nine?'

'I did not say that I had never been here before, monsieur.'

'It must have been long since. Talking to La Regina this morning, she told me it had stood where it stands for years.'

'Very likely. I have not seen it since I was a boy.'

'Then truly you must be the cousin of whom she talks.'

'Does she talk of me?' asked Hugh eagerly.

'Only to me.'

'Then you are intimately acquainted?'

'I know only her voice well—that completely. And you?'

'Unfortunately, I know her too little; and my little knowledge does her injustice.'

'Tell me what you know against her.'

'I know nothing; and if there were anything against her, monsieur, an English gentleman would be the last in the world to satisfy your curiosity.'

'A thousand pardons, signor—Sh! Here she comes. Stand back in the shadow here. I would not be seen. Ha! who is that with her? De Gaillefontaine—brute!'

René had drawn Hugh rapidly into the shadow afforded by a guelder-rosebush. Close by, Raffiolli passed with De Gaillefontaine. He was speaking to her in French,

to which she responded in short low sentences as they entered the arbour. René, holding Hugh's arm, whispered,

'They talk French—I cannot understand. I am of Italy; tell me what he speaks.'

Hugh stepped from the seclusion into which he had been drawn, and said to his companion,

'I will not listen, and certainly I shall not tell what I have unwillingly overheard. Let us take this path.'

'No, stop,' said René. 'The tone of his voice tells me that he spoke of love. He, De Gaillefontaine, to her, René! Come, we must watch them to the end of this.'

'We must do nothing of the kind.'

'You refuse?'

'Yes; and I will not let you play the spy upon my cousin.'

'Hush! speak lower; they will over-

hear you. He talks now. You think I am jealous of that man—and that is all. It is not so. And will you suffer her to go unprotected if I tell you she is in danger?'

'Danger!'

'Perhaps you believe these stories, and think your cousin is not—'

'I believe nothing but my own consciousness with regard to her; but if you tell me this Frenchman is unprincipled—'

'You will believe me! Then I tell you that five minutes ago he professed love for another woman.'

'I will stop here. We can hear her voice, though not what she says. If she is in danger and needs assistance, she shall have it.'

M. de Gaillefontaine led Giovanna Raffiolli into the arbour, which he had specially

prepared for the occasion. Around the sides were planted exquisite ferns and flowers, and in the surrounding foliage were distributed a hundred lamps, which shed a soft yet sufficient light. It is hardly necessary to add that monsieur's taste had supplied several large silvered globes, without which a Frenchman's paradise is imperfect. There was a seat covered with a yielding rug, and to this De Gaillefontaine conducted Raffiolli; and as she glanced round, he said,

'It is thus that I would surround your life with flowers, elegance, and joy.'

'Can I believe you?'

'Can you doubt me? Can you do your own beauty such injustice as to believe that one so constantly viewing you should not be enslaved? Can you doubt that I who have so long been at your side love you truly?'

'But you may love another also, my friend.'

'No, no; my word of honour, no!'

'I am told you have loved Giovanna Raffiolli.'

'Ah, it is an infamous falsehood—an abominable slander! Who is it that has told you this?'

'She herself.'

'Shameless, false, abandoned wretch! Is it thus she returns my many kindnesses? She knows how madly I love you, and is jealous, poor fool! She tells you this to prejudice you against me. How is it possible I could love her and see you? Is she so truly blind to her own deformities?'

'She tells me you would marry her.'

'Alas, what can I say? Will you believe this creature, this devil, who is mad of envy, in preference to one who loves you

and would sacrifice the world for your happiness?'

'Would you sacrifice her—this Giovanna Raffiolli?'

'With all my soul; oh, yes, with joy! Regard! She has for a long time troubled me—embarrassing me with attentions which disgust me. I would have shaken her off, driven her away long since, but that I thought you liked the woman. Now it will be easy if you disbelieve the lies she will tell. I will speak to her no more; no, not one word. The little Fiazotti sings better than she ten thousand times; to her we will give the leading *rôle* in future; then this Raffiolli will go away and poison herself with envy. Raffiolli! she is thirty-five, and her voice already cracks. Ah, my God! to think I could love her; I, who have at least taste!'

It is unfortunate for the charmer if

accident brings him in contact with a snake to which his fascinations are distasteful; and this is especially the case if the deluded man is unconscious of the mischief he is making for himself, believing that the charm he exercises is soothing the irritated creature. M. de Gaillefontaine had poured into Giovanna Raffiolli's ear the sweet love-strain intended for René, and the more he tried to please, the more he infuriated his pythoness.

She leaned back in the rug, and seemed to lend a pleased ear to all her companion could say against her. A nod, an approving word, confirmed his error, and led him to aggravate his mistake. Under this show of calmness the fiercest anger seethed and bubbled in the woman's breast, impatient of control, and gathering force under the restriction. But that she thirsted for a fuller deeper revenge, she would, despite

her promise to René, have thrown off her mask, and vented her rage in such sarcasm and irony as her bitter scorn and De Gaillefontaine's position suggested.

A dozen schemes of vengeance had entered her mind and been rejected, when this last insult was added. It was almost more than a mortal woman of thirty-four could endure to be told that she was thirty-five. She winced, and bowed her head to hide the expression which she feared even her mask would not conceal. In the presence of a too ardent lover, maidens bow their heads; thus thought M. de Gaillefontaine, and resolved at once to press his suit to a point, everything looking so favourable. Down he went on one knee, and took the hand of Giovanna in his. How cold it was!

At that moment her ear caught the sound of a man's voice, speaking low but near. Did this accident afford means of

revenge? With a few hackneyed sentiments, De Gaillefontaine took her hand to his lips and kissed it rapturously. In a moment she sprang to her feet, and cried, in a loud voice, 'Help! help!'

Before the astounded Frenchman could rise to his feet, there came one crashing through the green walls of that arbour, scattering the tiny lamps, treading down ferns and flowers, and laid hold of him by the nape of his neck.

'That man has insulted me, monsieur! I place his punishment and my redress in your hands!' cried Raffiolli, in her fierce excitement speaking in the dialect natural to her.

It was Hugh Biron to whom she appealed. The Gascon French was as comprehensible to him as broad Scotch to a Parisian; but her meaning was fully understood. There was no mistaking the denun-

ciation and command in her tone and gesture. Hugh was a joyful servant, and raising the Frenchman with cheerful alacrity, jerked him out of the door as if he had been no more than a misbehaving hound.

CHAPTER X.

When that cry for help came, and Hugh threw himself into the shrubbery before him with the impetuosity and vigour of a bull, René felt a trembling, and it seemed as though her heart had bounded into her throat. It was not fear for Hugh, in the risk he ran by answering that appeal for help, that affected her, but a great gladness at this proof of his love for her; nor was it fear for him that filled her with anxiety to be beside him when Raffiolli desired him to avenge her, but a proud exultation in the knowledge that he would do her bidding. She made her way as speedily as she could to the entrance of the arbour—having too great a regard for her tender flesh to follow

in Hugh's steps—with the desire to see her cousin punish De Gaillefontaine. She had no doubt of his ability; for a woman believes no physical achievement impossible to the man she loves. She got to the entrance as De Gaillefontaine came floundering out.

Hugh turned to Raffiolli, assuring her that the Frenchman should be made to apologise, and placing her under René's protection, hastily stepped out upon the open space to see what further attention was required by De Gaillefontaine.

The arbour was upon the edge of a bank sloping to the river, and down this De Gaillefontaine rolled, only saving himself from the water by digging his nails into the sod. The agile little man was on his feet in a minute, and his passion being aroused, he sprang up the incline to Hugh, who was waiting for him, deviating from

the straight line to meet him upon the level ground. The moon, shining through the trees, and the artificial illumination were sufficient for the men to see each other with tolerable distinctness. De Gaillefontaine made for Hugh with his foot, but his antagonist had learnt the trick in the studios, and knowing what to expect, stepped aside, caught the foot, and threw monsieur upon his back.

The folly of opposing his own dapper body to this monster of bone and gristle, this barbarous English six-foot giant, made itself evident to De Gaillefontaine as he recovered the breath bumped out of his lungs by the fall.

'Perhaps you will like to murder me,' he said, with sarcasm.

'No; but I shall have to throw you in the river unless you promise to apologise to my cousin.'

De Gaillefontaine, rising to his feet, at these words looked with a new interest at his adversary, seeing for the first time whom he had to deal with.

Hugh had lost his hat, and thrown aside his cloak, in bursting through the arbour, and thus De Gaillefontaine failed to recognise him in that brief space preceding his forcible ejectment.

He folded his arms, and said, looking into Hugh's face,

'So then I have the honour of to address Mr. Hugh Biron. I thought it was one of those tall footmen that I kicked. Do you require that I should apologise to Miss Biron for having treated her cousin as a lackey?'

'You can mention that I put you on your back, if you wish; but I don't insist upon that. It is an apology to Miss Biron for your ill conduct to her that I require.'

'I have done nothing for which to offer an apology,' said De Gaillefontaine, telling the truth, and cursing René for the practical joke he believed her to have played in leading him to declare his passion, and then exposing him to the insult of this cousin, who doubtless had been waiting for the signal to seize him and treat him shamefully.

'Whether you believe yourself innocent or not does not matter a straw to me. You must apologise to my cousin.'

'And if I refuse?'

'Then I shall pitch you into that river as surely as you stand high and dry now.'

'You will give me two minutes to consider this quaint proposal?'

'Five,' said Hugh, holding up his watch to the moonlight, as he turned towards the arbour. The place was deserted; looking along the path he saw the figures of René and Raffiolli in the distance. He returned

to M. de Gaillefontaine, who had not yet determined his course of action.

A few hours before, De Gaillefontaine had resolved to find occasion for quarrelling with Hugh, to force him to an encounter with the sword, with a view to getting rid of one whose existence jeopardised his prosperity. But the interview with René (as he supposed Raffiolli) materially altered the conditions which rendered the desperate measure necessary.

René might be seriously angry with him, he considered; she might have led him on to a declaration with a suspicion that his motive was unworthy, and the anger she expressed when he kissed her hand might truly have been genuine. In that case he had reason to suspect that no measure, however desperate, could save him from banishment. After all, his safest course was to get the money and bolt with

Giovanna Raffiolli; and in that case it would be advisable to avoid manslaughter, which might be followed by his apprehension before he had time to escape, and lead to an immediate examination of René's pecuniary affairs, which would make his position doubly hazardous.

His revengeful evil nature made him desire that René should share his mortification and downfall; Hugh killed, her position would be assured; the estate hers by right. What if, under the pretext of apology, he should declare before all her guests that she was an impostor, and unlawfully possessed of this estate? Against this there was to be considered the probability of a backhander, a thump, or a punch from this brutal cousin. No, that would not do. It were better to run away with the money, and communicate from a safe distance anything he might wish to say

affecting these Birons. But how could he apologise to her, perhaps before those who believed him to be what he represented?

'Monsieur,' he asked, 'what are the terms of this apology?'

'Whilst you have been thinking, I have been thinking. As a stranger was present and knows of your offence, it will be necessary that you make your apology in the presence of Miss Biron's visitors, unless she chooses to spare you that degradation.'

The picture suggested by these words to the mind of De Gaillefontaine sent the blood of shame over his face. He would not submit to degradation before Raffiolli and others. And yet that river! He did not doubt that Hugh would fulfil his threat.

'When am I to make this apology?' he asked, an idea flashing upon his mind.

'Before the company separates, and as soon as I learn from Miss Biron what words you shall say, and where you shall say them.'

'You will see that I cannot offer an apology with this shirt upon me.'

'You shall have time to change it.'

'Coffee will be served at half-past six.'

'If the company has not separated, that time will do: it is now five minutes past four.'

'*Then* I will apologise. That is arranged.'

Yes; all I have to do is to see that you obey.'

'Is that concluded?'

'Yes.'

'Then now, monsieur, we will speak of another matter.'

'Out with it.'

'You pitch me on my back, you roll me

over, you talk of to serve me like a *canaille*. In a word, you insult me!'

'Well?'

'I demand satisfaction—with the sword at six o'clock.'

'Rubbish!' said Hugh, with a short laugh, turning upon his heel.

'But it is not rubbish!' cried De Gaillefontaine, running to Hugh's side. 'You cannot refuse to fight.'

'Get out of my way; I decline to fight.'

'But you shall listen to me—if not here, in the theatre, or wherever you go; for I will follow and speak.'

'What have you to say?'

'You shall tell me why you decline to fight.'

'I shall not argue the point. It is enough that I refuse to fight.'

'You avoid to argue because it is an

impossible thing to defend cowardice. Monsieur, I shall follow you, and call you coward before all.'

'Then I shall most probably hit you.'

'Mon Dieu, it is all I wish! So you shall convince every one that what I tell them is a truth. You are a coward; you, with your great bones and your gristle, can without fear strike a *petit* like me; but you fear to place yourself on an equality, and fight me!'

'There is truth in what the little brute says,' thought Hugh, stroking his chin, as M. de Gaillefontaine continued:

'Perhaps you will tell those just and honest gentlemen as your excuse that it is contrary to law to fight duels. Oh, yes, it is contrary to law to risk your own life at six hours, but it is quit blameless to pitch me in the river, and risk my life at six and a half. How would it be if I were all gristle

and you a *petit?* Would you undertake to throw me in the river then?'

'Right again,' Hugh silently admitted; and he smiled at his small foe, with something of admiration for his spirited argument.

'Ah, you may laugh at me because you are great and strong, but it would be no laughing matter if we were equal. And so I tell you that you are a coward, a great coward; and I am ten thousand times more courageous, who do not fear you—big as you are! I, too, might decline to be pitched into the river. At this moment I might give you up to the policemans for battering me; and where would you be when the time arrived to pitch me into the waters?'

'Good, again!'

'You cannot answer me. It is true no one can defend cowardice. And you boast

of to be your cousin's champion! Why, her footman could do all that you do for her honour!'

'Hold your tongue!'

'I will not hold my tongues! I tell you you would beat a child for her, but you will not fight a man; you will not risk a thing for her sake. If she is insulted, all you will do is to pitch her offender into the water; and you dare not do that if a policemans is by. In that case you would threaten, perhaps—bah! You are a fine one to carry a rapier by your side. It is enough to make the cavalier whose dress you wear rise from his tomb to know how you disgrace his memories!'

'You have said enough. If you tell me where to meet, I will not disappoint you, although I suspect it will be to give you the advantage you deprecate in me. Where shall we meet?'

'On the ground where you insulted me, monsieur—at six.'

'I shall be there,' said Hugh, and walked away with very much such feeling as a man has in stepping into the car of a balloon for a first ascent.

When M. de Gaillefontaine, alone in his chamber, looked at his watch, it was twenty minutes to two. There was ample time to make all arrangements. The most important thing of the moment was his personal appearance. He changed his trousers and shirt, and then, taking his rapier, posed himself before the glass, admiring the whiteness of his shirt and the admirable fit of it. His complexion, his dark moustache and hair were all excellently thrown up by the undress. He made a few passes before the mirror, and rehearsed the final smile as he wiped his rapier with the lace-bor-

dered handkerchief from his bosom. Perfect!

Now for other business. He rang the bell, and instructed his man to have the brougham and a pair of horses harnessed and ready for instant departure by six o'clock, and the lodge-gate opened. The servant repeated the order and retired. M. de Gaillefontaine then emptied the contents of his desk into a small bag, added a flask of *eau de vie*, and a box of *bonbons* for madame. He placed these ready to his hand beside his long fur-lined Ulster and his Paris hat.

It was ten minutes past three when these arrangements were completed. There was no time to waste. Raffiolli was yet to be prepared for flight, and some few intimate friends to be apprised of the approaching duel. He felt certain of victory, and was not desirous of concealing his prowess. An

exhibition of this kind was one to be talked about afterwards. He put on his felt hat, concealed the rapier under the long cloak drawn about him, and locking his chamber-door, descended to the garden.

CHAPTER XI.

'Things are serious enough for a pipe,' thought Hugh, as he wandered along the path after leaving De Gaillefontaine. He lit up, and under the influence of tobacco his thoughts, which since accepting the challenge had been confusedly whirling, became still and coherent. In quiet contemplation he walked along, his hands behind him, his eye with an artist's instinct upon the signs of coming day. The faintest pink cloud spread in a thin line across the primrose sky to the east. Looking across the wide-spreading lawn, on which clung a thin veil of mist, to the left of him the moon yet held her sovereignty, standing strange and clear in the dark sky, and sending her

rays, yet powerful, through the crisp foliage of the beeches. To the west the sky was dark; spreading towards the coming sun, it faded into sweet pale green and yellow. Over the river vapour curled. Every moment the light increased. Just where the path left the beechwood, and the morning light was strongest, Hugh stopped to watch a spider, which had already begun his labours.

As he stood thus, a noiseless foot pressed the grass behind him, and a hand was laid on his shoulder. It was the young Spaniard.

'What are you doing, monsieur?'

'Moralising over this little labourer, and wondering whether the unusual sounds of to-night have broken his rest. You left Miss Biron safe? Has she recovered from her annoyances?'

'I left her in the hands of a partner, and the music you hear she is dancing to.'

'Dancing!' exclaimed Hugh. He sighed, and put his pipe away. René noticed this expression of regret, and said, not forgetting the Italian accent she had assumed,

'One would think, monsieur, to look at your sad face now, which a moment since was filled with pleasure, that a spider's occupation affords you more delight than a lady's happiness.'

'You would not understand my feelings if I were to explain them.'

'I understand them without,' said René, putting her hands tenderly on Hugh's shoulder. 'We Spaniards are old-young. You take up this young beauty's quarrel because you love her; and she is careless what becomes of you. Heaven! I would never forgive such heartless indifference.'

'Yes, you would. You would find a dozen excuses for her if you loved her at all.

It does not necessarily follow that she should love you because you love her.'

'But, monsieur, love apart, you are her kinsman.'

'The less necessity for formality.'

'She left you struggling with a passionate foe.'

'You would not have had her stay?'

'But why did she send no one to your assistance?'

'Because it would have been a bad compliment to her champion. After all, it seems to me that she has taken the wisest and best course. It is the surest way of diverting attention from a matter which should be concealed. She doubtless feels that I have nothing to fear from so slight an antagonist. Did she send you to see how the affair had ended?'

'No. She gave me no commission of that kind. Even I have more feeling for

you than she has. It was to satisfy my own anxiety I left her and sought you.'

'You *are* a warm-hearted fellow! Thank you for your sympathy,' said Hugh, taking René's hand and pressing it. Her fingers responded, and were last to relax. 'Warm-hearted!' thought she; 'ah, if you only knew how warm!' looking up into his face with love of the gentleness and truth she saw in it.

'And what have you done with the Frenchman?' she asked.

'Given him a few hours to change his shirt. By the bye,' he said, walking along the grass and looking down thoughtfully, 'your inquiry, and the friendship we have struck up, remind me of my business with him.'

René slipped her hand under his arm, and looking sidelong, caught the thoughtful expression of his features.

'I know nothing about these matters except what I have read. It's the thing, I believe, to have a second. Do you know anything about duelling?'

'Duelling!' echoed René, stopping dead short, and trembling in every limb.

'Why, what's the matter, laddie?' cried Hugh, catching René by the arm, for it seemed as if the young fellow were falling. 'I thought you Spaniards were fond of this kind of amusement. How do you feel? There's a seat yonder. Shall I carry you, or do you feel stronger?'

'I can walk, thank you, monsieur,' said she. Yet very willingly would she have been lifted in those faithful arms.

Hugh put his arm round this trembling Spaniard, leading him to the seat; and when they were seated, he said,

'Seconds don't have to fight—at least not according to my knowledge. But if you

fear the sight of a couple of rapiers crossed, you can keep out of the way. There's no necessity for a second. I shall do just as well without.'

'Are you going to fight De Gaillefontaine?' asked René.

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Because, as he very clearly showed me, though upon my word I couldn't exactly explain it to you, as my cousin's champion I am compelled to.'

'With rapiers?'

'Yes. I suppose pistols would excite attention, and so possibly prevent the victor making his escape. Besides, there is more risk with pistols.'

'Yes, to you,' said René, remembering Hugh's play.

'How do you know that?' asked Hugh sharply.

'Oh, you English are bad swordsmen, and this De Gaillefontaine was once a teacher of fencing. He has fought already.'

'That is fortunate for me. A clumsy fencer might have the ill luck to kill me; this man, for his own neck's sake, will be careful to wound me only. Hope he'll spare my right arm, or how the deuce shall I paint? I shall have to emulate the talented Miss Biffin, and use my toes.'

In seasons of danger most men are lively; Hugh looked forward to the meeting, and amusement was his predominant sensation.

René looked at him with astonishment.

'Oh, but it is folly to oppose yourself to one against whom you have no chance. It is altogether unfair.'

'Not more unfair than taking the little beggar by the neck and heels and throwing him into the river, and that is

what I have promised to do if I have the chance.'

'You have no chance. You are simply offering your body for him to pass his sword through.'

'That is not complimentary, sir. How can you tell that I am not a regular *enfant terrible* with the sword?'

'By your appearance. And you are going coolly to throw your life away for the sake of a girl that cares nothing for you.'

'Ah, perhaps that is the reason.'

'Tell me, if you thought that beautiful René loved you deeply, or as faithfully and fully as you love her, would you be so careless of your life?'

'Yes, in defending her honour. It is thus, monsieur: rightly or wrongly, I have the impression upon my mind that I should be wanting in courage to support my

cousin's honour if I refused this challenge; and so, rightly or wrongly, I will fight, and abide the consequences.'

René sighed. If the knowledge of her love would have prevented the meeting, she would there and then have flung away her mask, and without reserve have told that she loved him. She sat still, thinking of 'the situation.' To undeceive De Gaillefontaine at the last moment, and command him to drop his sword, was one way of saving her cousin. But she rejected this scheme in favour of another, which accorded more with her heart's desire and the romantic disposition of her nature.

'If you are strong enough to walk,' said Hugh, breaking the silence, 'we will move from here. The grass is damp; it is not of much importance to me in the present position of affairs, but a cold might be inconvenient to you.'

They rose, and René said, speaking now with perfect calmness,

'You asked me to be your second.'

'Yes; but if you are nervous—'

René laughed.

'I am not nervous. Sudden excitement affects me always with weakness; but I recover and feel it no more. I will be your second. At what time do you meet?'

'At six, by the boat-house.'

'Where is your rapier?'

'Here it is; but I don't know what kind of skewer it is. These theatrical swords are not very dependable weapons of defence, but I suppose it is good enough.' He drew it. 'Perhaps you know something of these things; what sort of a blade is it?'

René took it in her hand, looked along its edge critically, and then setting the point upon the gravel, leant upon it. It snapped in half.

'Now you've done it, and I shall have to find another. But it isn't likely I should hit him hard enough to break the sword.'

René drew her own rapier, and bent it with her hands.

'You shall have this, monsieur, when the time comes. And now I will find this Monsieur de Gaillefontaine and make further arrangements. The time is going. Will you bid your cousin adieu?'

'You don't think I should let her know, do you? I hope that if I am killed you will tie a stone about my neck and sink me in the river. We shall have time to talk about that after you have made arrangements. We must not keep monsieur waiting.'

'You will find me at the boat-house,' said René, and hastened away.

In the theatre she found M. de Gaillefontaine looking for her.

'I want to see you, my Giovanna,' he whispered; 'come with me.'

René accompanied him to a *loge*. He took her hand, and speaking gaily, said,

'My Giovanna, you are absurdly jealous. You have avoided me. Now regard how I revenge myself. At six o'clock I have a little business which will detain me for ten minutes. At that time you will have your maid ready with all your dresses and jewels. This key will admit you to my apartment: there, beside my hat and my coat, you will find a little black bag; take it, and be careful of it. It has the wealth within it which is to keep us for the rest of our lives. In the coachyard you will find the brougham ready to depart. You will seat yourself there. In a very little time I shall join you, and together we will fly from this country; and like little mice in the fable, live happy ever after.

Now will you tell me I love this René Biron better than you, my Giovanna?'

'No, monsieur, I can say nothing. Very likely what you tell me is the truth; but why should you tell me this? It is not what I have come to you to ask.'

'Pst! You irritate me, my dear. Why will you insist, at such a moment of crisis, to pretend you are not yourself Giovanna? This ring betrays you!'

'You admire the ring, monsieur?' said René, holding it before him. 'So do I. You wish to know of this ring? *Eh, bien!* it was given me to-night by a lady. And now that I have satisfied your curiosity, you will be good enough to tell me where I shall find the friend who supports you in your affairs of honour.'

M. de Gaillefontaine was as if petrified; he stared at René without moving a muscle or uttering a word.

'I must ask you again to direct me to your friend; the time it flies,' said René.

In utter bewilderment, De Gaillefontaine led the way from the *loge* until they came to a knot of men engaged in whispered conversation. One stout Italian bowed as René approached; he was less perplexed by the young Spaniard.

'You represent M. de Gaillefontaine?' said René.

The Italian assented, and signalled to De Gaillefontaine that he was not wanted; but the Gascon had lost his habitual composure, and, fascinated by this incomprehensible Spaniard, disregarded the signal and waited.

'You come from the esquire, Hugh Biron?'

'No, signor; I come upon my own account. I wish to meet M. de Gaillefontaine with the rapier, upon the ground appointed

for his meeting with Mr. Biron. I wish to meet him as soon as it is possible. The morning already breaks; in an hour it will be light. Shall we say four o'clock?'

It was difficult to say who of that group was most astonished by René's declaration.

'*You* wish to meet him in person?'

René bowed, and hoped she could be accommodated with the meeting she desired.

'May I ask your reason for this demand?'

'Gentlemen, Mr. Hugh Biron is my friend. He is utterly ignorant of fencing, and De Gaillefontaine, knowing this, has challenged him to fight. He has accepted the challenge for six o'clock; you will see why I require the meeting beforehand. Is it sufficient that I call monsieur a coward

before you all, or shall I hit him upon the face?'

The Italian turned to De Gaillefontaine. He was deadly white with fury and superstitious terror.

'I will meet ten hundreds, if they are all devils!' he said.

CHAPTER XII.

Her heart bounding with excitement, René left the theatre, and with long strides, not out of keeping with her assumed character, made her way towards the boat-house. René was conscious of the danger to which she exposed herself in facing De Gaillefontaine, but that only served to increase her elation. She desired no advantage which should lessen her risk, nothing which could detract from her heroism. The glory of proving to Hugh that she was capable of noble generosity was before her, and she thought with pardonable pride of the exceptional position she had taken.

'How ever the duel results I am a gainer,' thought she, 'for it raises me to

a level with him; and though I fall, he will see that I have risked for his life all that he could venture for my honour.'

But though the shedding of her own blood was not without romantic charm, she prayed fervently that she might so disable De Gaillefontaine as to prevent his engaging with Hugh.

Down by the boat-house the mist from the river gave obscurity to the distance and softened the light of the rising sun. All was soft gray, save the crests of the noble beeches, which, reared above the vapour, sparkled all bright and fresh in the level rays as the leaves fluttered to the gentle breathing of the wind.

Hugh was walking near the arbour with his hands behind him and the inseparable pipe in his lips. René, catching sight of the tall figure, broke into a little run involuntarily, was half ashamed of her-

self, stopped, and resumed her long stride.

Love is doubled by self-sacrifice. René had not reckoned before this time how deeply dear Hugh was to her. She admitted it to herself now, and came to his side, her eyes sparkling, her blood tingling, her hands coveting the touch of his.

'Ah, young un! I was thinking what a capital picture this duel would make, if it hadn't been done before. I might try it with this gray morning summer light.'

'Are these the gravest thoughts you have at a time when your life may be measured by minutes?'

'The gravest I choose to talk about,' said Hugh, with a sigh. 'Vulgarity, I suppose, grew out of the Latin verb to publish.'

'And you still think of carrying out this suicidal intention. You will fight with monsieur?'

'Of course I shall, youngster,' said he, with a sigh. 'We English are not a blood-thirsty race of men; but when we accept a challenge, we fight.'

'In a good cause. But this René!'

'Say no more, that's a good boy. I have been thinking of her as I hope she is; and if I am to leave this world presently, I would like to carry my pretty image of René with me to the next.'

They walked some yards in silence, for the tears had sprung into René's eyes, and a diamond-drop cut a furrow through the white paint upon her face.

''Tis well I wear a mask,' thought she.

'I am thinking,' said Hugh, 'about the few things I shall leave behind. Of course my cousin is heiress to that valuable property. There is nothing but a few pictures and fewer pounds. If you would be good enough to tell her my wishes, it would

answer the purpose of the most elaborate will that could be concocted. I would like the boys to have all my pictures, save one.'

'The boys!'

'My old friends. Charlie Brock will distribute them. Give him my love. Here's a shake of the hand for the kind-hearted old blunderer. Halloo, laddie! what's this?' (Looking at his hand.) 'Are you piping your eye? You faint-hearted little chap! You won't remember what I tell you.'

'Yes, yes; it's — it's — huph! — all right!'

'I'll knock it off sharp. You'll take a nicknack out of the lot to remember me by —my easel, if you like; or wait, there's an old brown Toby that I was always fond of —have that. But there's one picture I want my cousin to have. It stands now upon the easel. It is a portrait of her, and

I am proud of it, for it is faithful to her purity and sweetness. Tell her that though I wronged her by a doubt, it was but for the minute, and that as I have painted her upon that canvas she has dwelt in my heart, and will be seen in my last moment.'

He had thrown away his pipe as a thing which he should require no more, and he held René's hand in his as he spoke, nor dropped it when he ceased.

She, turning his hand, smoothed the back of it with her little palm. She could think of no better consolation that she dared offer. Unconscious of that mute caress, Hugh stood silent and grave, as a sense of the awful proximity to death for the first time came upon him. A sigh, a quick movement as if he were awaking from a dream, and then he said with his usual manner,

'You will give this little message?'

René could not speak; but she ceased to smooth the hand, and bowing her head, touched it with her lips.

'How warm the nature is of these Italians!' thought Hugh.

The sound of approaching footsteps put Hugh upon his mettle; René also was roused to energy. A smile of satisfaction irradiated her lips and sparkled in her eager eyes. It was by an effort that she controlled her exuberant spirits to that degree of composure necessary for her safety. She turned towards the advancing party, and her lips closed tightly over her teeth, whilst through her finely-cut nostrils her breath came full and regular.

M. de Gaillefontaine's second and a friend advanced, and behind them, at a dozen yards, followed a group, heading which strode M. de Gaillefontaine, with the swagger of Hector.

'Rather before their time,' murmured Hugh cheerily.

'Not many minutes,' replied René.

'Will you settle the preliminaries for me?'

'Undoubtedly,' answered René quietly; and leaving Hugh's side, she advanced with firm step to meet her antagonist's second.

De Gaillefontaine drew up, and his friends clustered around him.

A dozen paces brought René face to face with the second, and after the formal salutation she said,

'I have no second. As I have said, this Englishman knows nothing of the duel, so I must settle the particulars for myself. Will you be so good as to tell me if M. de Gaillefontaine wishes to fight until one is disabled or killed, or whether superior skill shall decide the combat?'

'I may answer for my principal. He

is not barbarous. A skilful *coup* shall decide.'

'*Par exemple*, if I am first to draw blood, my adversary shall be considered disabled from fighting afterwards.'

M. de Gaillefontaine's representative hesitated.

'If monsieur will not concede this point, my only alternative is the duel *à outrance*, since my object in fighting is to prevent the meeting with Mr. Biron.'

The second withdrew, conferred with his principal, and, returning, said that M. de Gaillefontaine was satisfied to abide by a proof of superior skill; but that as a scratch frequently arose from accident, he must insist upon two wounds. He would forego his meeting with Mr. Biron in the event of his being worsted in the first encounter.

René bowed; and they then marked the

ground. M. de Gaillefontaine's second looked at his watch—

'We have yet five minutes.'

'I am quite ready,' said René.

The second retired to the group, and carefully took the cloak from his principal's shoulders. M. de Gaillefontaine looked upon his shirt, took the rapier, tried it in the air, and waited with the stateliest composure for his second's word of command.

Meanwhile René, turning to Hugh with a smile, said, as she took the cloak from her shoulders,

'Hold this a while for me. I have a little affair with M. de Gaillefontaine that comes off before yours.'

For a minute Hugh was silenced by astonishment, but when the motive of this quaint friend's action appeared to him, he stepped towards De Gaillefontaine's party, and said,

'I have at this moment and for the first time learnt that M. de Gaillefontaine proposes to fight my friend. I beg to object. I will fight M. de Gaillefontaine.'

With a smile of superb contempt M. de Gaillefontaine said,

'All in good time, my esteemed sir. *I* will fight with you at six o'clock, as arranged.'

It was explained to Hugh, in a dozen ways by as many voices, that his objection was untenable. His meeting was for six o'clock, of which time it yet wanted fully two hours. He turned to René, who had already taken her ground. She had not removed her mask, and was rolling up the sleeve of her tunic. He implored, he remonstrated, he urged that her action was unjust to him; but all his arguments were of no avail; and now M. de Gaillefontaine was slowly, grandly advancing.

'Surely you will remove your mask,' said Hugh; and his words were echoed by others, as René bowed.

'No; I will fight thus.'

M. de Gaillefontaine, at these words, blanched, and his hand touched his sword-hilt infirmly. The superstition of his race was uneradicated, and anything not to be understood was regarded as *diablerie*. Who was this foe that, in the garb of a youth, in the semblance of a woman, dared him to fight, and could afford to fight under the disadvantage of a mask and loose masquerade dress? Was it the avenging double of a forgotten victim? Would that mask presently drop away, revealing a face to paralyse his arm and expose his breast to the keen point of this as yet unknown?

CHAPTER XIII.

In skill with the sword De Gaillefontaine and René were fairly equal. René, constitutionally strong, vigorous, quick of perception, and resolute in carrying out a set purpose, had applied herself to the art of fencing at De Gaillefontaine's instigation, and had succeeded in it so well that her master was glad to discontinue his lessons. His pupil at that time had attained to a sufficient proficiency. She fenced as well as he; and further practice might disturb the nice equilibrium which should be sustained between pupil and master. Since those fencing lessons neither had handled a weapon, except when René took up the foil in Hugh's studio.

De Gaillefontaine had not admitted even

to himself that René was his superior; such an admission with respect to any one or anything was impossible to one with so good an opinion of himself; and René did not overrate her own ability in thinking herself nearly as adroit as her instructor. Nevertheless, as they stood before each other now, the advantage was with René, notwithstanding her loose costume and the mask upon her face.

In the first place she knew, by her practice with De Gaillefontaine, which were his weakest guards, his most dangerous attacks; but a like knowledge, which had given him an occasional ascendency over René upon former occasions, was useless to him now that her identity was concealed from him.

But he suffered from still greater disadvantage in his adversary's mask.

A swordsman's safety depends upon his sight as much as his dexterity. The ex-

pression of his opponent's eye tells him what attack to parry, what advantage to seize. René's eyes told M. de Gaillefontaine nothing; the mask entirely concealed their expression. He felt this disadvantage the moment their swords met. Through the piercings in the black-silk visor he saw nothing but devilish fire that dazzled his eyes and baffled his understanding. It took all his courage to meet that steady basilisk look; what to prepare for, what to do, he knew not.

René, detecting his weakness, made a pass which De Gaillefontaine barely attempted to parry, and at once pricked her adversary's sword-arm above the elbow. They dropped their points. René shuddered as a little red patch made its appearance upon the white shirt-sleeve. Hugh stepped to her side as De Gaillefontaine's friends surrounded him.

'My dear fellow,' said he, 'throw away that cursed steel, and have done with this villanous folly. The man's got as much as he wants; leave him.'

'To you? I might as well have risked nothing as to leave the work half done.'

'Will nothing induce you to desist?'

'Will you promise me to slink out of your quarrel if I sneak out of mine? No, you won't, because this wonderful René's honour is concerned. Now, supposing that I value your life as much as you do this girl's honour, will any inducement make me forego my service to you? No.'

De Gaillefontaine's sleeve was turned back, and his wound declared a trifle. He would gladly have had it more serious. He received advice from all sides, and was assured that his victory was certain against this foolhardy boy. Feeling how little he could depend upon himself, and galled by

the advice and consolation for the wound, which all declared was accidental, the Gascon grew desperate at heart. 'When you can't parry, thrust,' recurred to his mind, and he took his place with the determination to attack boldly. René saw his intention before they crossed swords, although De Gaillefontaine avoided her eyes until the last moment. He lunged twice in rapid succession, but his point was turned in each instance. The eye behind the mask showed nothing, neither of motive nor apprehension, but their steady gleam was insupportable. De Gaillefontaine blinked as though lightning flashed in his eyes, and, maddened by dread and passion, he shortened his rapier and threw himself furiously against his adversary. With a rapid movement and a firm guard, René saved herself; but her point, again catching his sword-arm almost in the place of the previous

wound, was driven through to the guard by the force of his impetuous plunge.

René shrieked with horror, and dropping her hand, tottered backwards, leaving her rapier in De Gaillefontaine's arm. The sight of his blood upon her hand stopped the swift beating of her heart; a strange humming noise in her head drowned the words she was conscious Hugh spoke to her; a cold clammy sweat broke out upon her face; a deadly sickness came over her; a confused vision of the gaily-costumed maskers drawing her rapier from De Gaillefontaine's arm, mingled with the look of hate and pain upon his features; the trees above her, and the face of Hugh livid with fear,—whirled before her, and she lost consciousness. As Hugh caught the tottering Spaniard in his encircling arms, he became aware that the body he held was a woman's.

'Water, water!' he cried. 'Quick!'

An Italian with a spirit-flask turned to assist, and advised Hugh to remove the mask. He remembered being told that the mask was fastened to the wig. Supporting René's head upon his knee, he took the wig by the edge, and lifted it. A loud cry of astonishment from Hugh and the Italian attracted attention, and De Gaillefontaine and the man supporting him moved towards the lesser group to discover the cause of surprise. The Spaniard's wig and mask were upon the grass, and the mystery was solved. The blue-black hair had fallen down, released from confinement, and René's head was reduced to its natural proportions; and though the lower part of her face was disfigured with hair and smeared with moistened paint, she was at once recognised.

'La Regina!'

And now M. de Gaillefontaine was left

to fare for himself, and all thought was bestowed upon René; but Hugh for very jealousy would let no hand touch or administer to her recovery but his own.

He lifted the tall slight girl in his arms as if she were a child, resting her cheek in the hollow of his shoulder; and so he carried her slowly to the arbour, where the rugs were spread upon the seat. Whilst he thus bore her, her bosom heaved, a sigh coming from her lips flooded Hugh with delight. He knew that she was living, who, body and soul, was ten times lovelier than his hopeful imagining had pictured her; and that she loved him.

Now was patient faith rewarded, and he possessed the joy which comes with the triumph of a forlorn hope.

CHAPTER XIV.

Left to himself, M. de Gaillefontaine, after a moment's reflection, quitted the party noiselessly and as quickly as his exhaustion permitted. His wound had been bound tightly with handkerchiefs; and the hæmorrhage stopped, it would take no hurt for a while. A more momentous matter called for despatch. He had expressed his intention of bolting, and to do so he must act immediately. In half an hour's time the servants would know of the revolution that had taken place, and the carriage to take him away would not be at his command. He had revealed to René his most sinister intentions, and had no hope of forgiveness from her. His affairs were too desperate

to think of any resort save the safest, and that was to take his little bag of gold and notes out of the country whilst it was possible.

As he approached the theatre, he stopped to draw the cloak over his wounded arm, and slouch his hat. The ligature about his arm gave him pain; and as he was loosening the knot with his teeth and fingers, he felt a hand laid upon his shoulder. He turned in fear, and found himself faced by the woman in white velvet, whom he had mistaken for René.

She raised her mask sufficiently for him to see the face of Giovanna Raffiolli, as with a sardonic smile, and pointing to his bloody shirt, she asked,

'Do you love me *very* much?'

She replaced her mask, and with a light laugh rejoined a couple of men waiting for her at the angle formed by the path.

De Gaillefontaine clenched his teeth, and followed her quickly; at the angle he stopped and watched her cross the lawn and enter the theatre. She turned once, and kissed her hand. The Gascon's rage and bitter thirst for revenge upon this woman, to whom he now attributed all his misfortunes, were too deep for the ordinary form of relief—cursing.

It was broad daylight; there was no time for delay, not even for revenge. He must hasten his departure, if only to avoid the derision and ridicule that would pursue him when his humiliation was no longer secret. Ah, how those enemies would rejoice in his disgrace and defeat! Oh, that this venom in his heart would take the form of a deadly pestilence, and strike down every one of these revelling foes! With such bitter yearning in his soul he mounted the terrace, and made for the door

of the house. Suddenly he stopped, inspired with an idea.

'Why shouldn't I, who raised this place, ruin it?' he thought. 'At least in my going I may show that I am great; no miserable thief stealing away, but a defeated king retiring from the palace I built and destroyed. Why not? It would avert attention from myself, and facilitate escape.'

A pantaloon and an Irishman coming towards him decided him in adopting the suggestion of his evil genius.

'Well,' said Mr. Fox, 'have you decided? Will you buy this very troublesome piece of parchment?'

'Yes. We will settle our accounts this hour, and this parchment shall trouble neither of us any more. Follow me to where we may make our settlement privately.'

'You go first, my friend,' said Fox to his friend with the cudgel.

De Gaillefontaine turned about quickly, descended the terrace-steps, and led the way to the back of the theatre, which was concealed by a shrubbery. He looked into the theatre with an evil eye as he passed the chief entrance, which was wide open to admit the fresh morning breeze, and seemed already to catch his name mingled with the laughter. Arrived at a door in the wall of the theatre, he paused and took a bunch of keys from his pocket. His wound made him powerless to use his right hand, so he put the keys into Mr. Fox's hands, pointing out the key to make use of. No one could be more considerate and obliging than Mr. Fox; he opened the door, closed it when they were inside, and put the key in the lock for use when they returned. M. de Gaillefontaine bowed his acknowledgment.

In planning the theatre, M. de Gaillefontaine, with a view to spectacular effect, had given extreme depth to the stage; but in rehearsing the opera this depth was considered an acoustic disadvantage, and a considerable space was parted off by means of a strong wooden partition. It was the end of the stage thus divided in which the three men now stood.

There was a small skylight in the roof, but the light transmitted was sufficient to reveal only the outlines of the larger benches, steps, &c., with which the place was encumbered.

'We must have a light,' said M. de Gaillefontaine.

The Irishman had matches loose in his pocket, and he proceeded to strike one on the bowl of his clay pipe. Meanwhile Mr. Fox, standing close by the door in partial obscurity, was cogitating. His inquisitive

disposition had led him, in the course of the hour previous to the appointed meeting, into the stable-yard, and his conversational powers he had employed to such advantage that he learnt of De Gaillefontaine's intention to leave Riverford at a moment's notice. Why he should leave hastily and secretly, Fox could not understand; but he was prepared to regard every action of the Gascon's as treacherous and inimical to his interests. He reflected how easy it would be for De Gaillefontaine, who knew every turn of this building, to give him and his protector the slip, and leave them to find their way through the devious windings, while he was flying from Riverford in safe secrecy. Mr. Fox stealthily closed his soft long fingers round the keys, and withdrew them from the door, while his friend was lighting the match. He had no knowledge of the good his action was doing; but in all doubt-

ful courses he followed that which at least could do no harm.

De Gaillefontaine took the match and lit the gas. Mr. Fox looked about him. There were no passages; the place seemingly was merely a large lofty workshop. The carpenters and scene-painters had used it. The floor was covered thickly with shavings and a litter of light slips of wood, such as are used to form the framework of flats and wings; and against the wooden partition was stacked the scenery used in the performance, and removed hither through a lofty narrow door made for the purpose. In one corner of this compartment was a little room of light woodwork, made for the use of the gentlemen engaged in painting the scenes. It was carpeted and furnished with several easy-chairs, a table, desk, books, a spirit-case, and other comforts. To this little chamber M. de Gaillefontaine

led the way, and holding the door, ushered in his guests.

'Be seated,' he said; 'I will be with you immediately.'

He closed the door quickly, and, as Mr. Fox had expected, the key was turned upon them.

'He's a-goin' to give us the go-by,' said the Irishman, *alias* 'John Smith.' 'It's true what we heered in the stable-yard, and he's locked us in here whilst he cuts. Shall I bust the door?'

'We will wait two minutes,' said Mr. Fox. 'I took the precaution to bring the keys out of the other door.'

'You are a deep un, master.'

Mr. Fox felt flattered, and smilingly waited for a minute. Suddenly these two became aware of a difference in the appearance of each other: the same instant their eyes turned upwards. The wall of this

chamber extended up only some eight or ten feet. The glow upon them was reflected from the roof of the theatre far over their heads. It was no more than two minutes since De Gaillefontaine left them, yet this had happened; and now smoke, hot and pungent, blew over the thin wall and down upon them.

'Fire!' the two men screamed. Simultaneously there came a rattling of the door, as De Gaillefontaine, terror-stricken, fumbled at the key. Fox's burly protector waited for no locks, but threw his ponderous shoulder against the thin door, bursting the lock away and throwing De Gaillefontaine to the ground at the same moment.

'The keys, the keys!—help me!—carry me!—save me, for God's sake!' cried De Gaillefontaine frantically.

There was no time for explanation; in-

deed it seemed that the time was past when action could be of use. Between them and the door was a sheet of fire, yielded by the carpet of shavings upon which they stood. Quick as a sweeping wind the flame ran along, eating as it went, expanding like vapour. It was close upon De Gaillefontaine as he scrambled to his feet. No time for consideration. Fox, holding his breath and shielding his face with his arms, rushed to the wall, and along it towards the door. The fire licked eagerly at the air that came through the crevice between the door and the step; yet surely one might rush through that, might bear a scorching whilst opening the door that led into that clear, cold, delicious air of safety without! No time to think: yet nearer came the flame, and there was no air to breathe. Away he rushed, over flames that threw sparks up into his face as he trod among them, forcing

him to close his eyes at the time when all depended on his seeing. Still onward he pushed, stumbling, rising, seeing nothing, feeling nothing but a numbing as of intense cold, the piercing of sharp wounds.

De Gaillefontaine, like a scared wolf, rushed where he saw another run; and presently, as they groped in the blinding sparks, he fell into Fox's arms, and screamed entreatingly for deliverance. As he drew breath to cry, stinging embers flew into his mouth. Not three minutes before he had stood in this very spot, putting a light to the shavings at his feet. He clung to Fox as he, with more command over himself and stronger vitality, rushed hither and thither feeling for the door, which was not to be found. Comparative trifles at that moment were awful in their significance. The edge of his shirt-cuff was no longer straight, but ragged; and moving his hand

instinctively to thrust his fingers through his hair, he found his head singed bald. After that his fingers conveyed no idea of form or condition to his senses. The keys dropped from Fox's useless fingers, yet still he groped along the wall, guided by the resistance to the weight of his body when the sense of touch was lost to his arms. De Gaillefontaine fell to shrieking. He had been brought to a stand by a carpenter's bench. He could not see it, for sight was gone. Standing there, the burning wood under his feet yielded to his weight. To him it seemed that his legs were crumbling under him, and with a yell he threw himself face down, shrieking his last amidst the white embers. But Fox, with silent perseverance, now almost mechanical, for his senses were wandering, sought escape.

In the scenes leaning against the parti-

tion was a great irregular circle, eaten away already by the flames. The margin blazed with the touch of the monster's teeth, and the planking of the partition beneath was marked by patches of fiery saliva. The heat was cracking the glass in the skylight, and the flames roared with delight and leaped up as the vital air came in.

'John Smith' saw Mr. Fox enter the fire, saw De Gaillefontaine rush after him, and waited to see the effect before he followed, sweeping the shavings from about him in a circle, and bending low the while. The Gascon's awful screams warned him that attempt to escape by the door was fatal.

A part of the partition was yet untouched by fire, and against this he threw himself with all his strength. The shock tumbled the burning embers from the scenery and shook sparks out of the board-

ing, but there was no cracking in the boards his shoulder hit. A stout piece of quartering backed the other side. He changed his position for the next throw, and besides shaking down more flaming rags, split a board. Breathing was difficult; but 'John Smith' was a man of endurance, and his force was no wise lessened when again he threw himself against the boards. Another split followed that blow.

'Gord, how that poor brute do scream!' he thought as he banged at the walls. This time a piece of board, three feet long, flew from the quarterings to which it was nailed; but at the same moment a wing, the base of which was gnawed away, crumbled, and sliding sideways towards him, fell a wreck of smouldering canvas and wood, where he had been standing, throwing up a cloud of spark-laden smoke. 'John Smith' was blinded with the stinging smoke, and a

giddiness came upon him as he tried to breathe. Once again and yet more furiously he plunged at the division, cracked another board well-nigh through just under the hole already made, wrenched it with fury from its place, and got his head and shoulders through, tearing away clothes and skin, but getting air, which was all he wanted at the moment. He wriggled his body through and came down on his head and hands, murmuring his thanks to Heaven, and vowing within his heart never again to steal the midnight hare.

Not five minutes had sped since De Gaillefontaine found the key gone from the door and the fire he had kindled beyond his power to stamp out, when John Smith came tumbling out of the awful hell-trap into life and liberty. For to him there was safety where he now stood, and he had no

sense of the terror felt by those who, a minute before, were struggling to escape at the theatre door. Smoke and flame licked out of the hole through which he had come, as if in greedy pursuit of the escaped prisoner. Choking blinding smoke filled the place, obscuring even the gaslights.

The boards of the partition spluttered and cracked as the fire gnawed them, and when they writhed from their place a fiery tongue shot out a dozen yards and clung to all it touched. Flaming boards fell upon the scorched stage, farther and farther the fiery tongues protruded, licking the proscenium, the light balcony, the roof, advancing onward as rapidly as the words leave the pen, as quickly as John Smith, crawling, scrambling, running, tumbling, then crawling and scrambling again, made his way before into the open air.

Those who had escaped and were col-

lected upon the lawn watching the progress of destruction were astonished when 'John Smith,' staggering in his gait, rushed towards them with arms raised, and gasping the fresh air.

Soon after the smoke was perceived the screams of De Gaillefontaine were heard; but each one of those who heard the cries for help was too deeply interested in his own safety to regard the danger of another, and soon his shrieks were lost in those of the crowd fighting their way from peril. These first cries of alarm were remembered, and men and women ran towards the poor wretch, who, now that there was no longer real danger nor necessity for exertion, appeared in the last extremity of fear and exhaustion. He fell upon the grass, and, as he gained strength to speak, cried,

'Quick—go round to the back door, for God's sake! Two men are burning alive!'

There was a rush to the door. A blow of the heel drove in the charred and crumbling woodwork, and out belched the flames, driving the assailants back for their lives; but there came no sound save the roaring of fire, the fall of timber, the cracking and splitting of the slated roof. De Gaillefontaine and Fox had ceased to cry, and suffered no more.

CHAPTER XV.

As consciousness returned to René, she was at a loss to understand the strange movement of her body. She opened her eyes, and, looking upwards, saw Hugh's face bending tenderly over her; her feeling was that of a child waking from a troubled sleep, and finding protection so close, she smiled and closed her eyes again. She had a dreamy sense that something dreadful had taken place, but it yielded for a time to the consideration of her present position. Sleepy delight possessed her with the knowledge that these were Hugh's good arms about her, and Hugh's dear breast on which her cheek lay.

He stooped to lay her on the rug, and

the change of position more fully awaked her. Rapidly recollection of past events broke upon her, and, starting up suddenly, she asked what was become of *him*—De Gaillefontaine. Hugh assured her that his hurt was not dangerous, and that she need fear nothing on his account.

'If he wishes to go away, let no one stay him,' said René; 'and let him take what he will. He was true to me when we both were poor, however false he is now.' Presently bethinking her of the dress she wore, she said, 'I am stronger, quite myself again. Let me go to my room and change this dress, or you will still prefer your picture to the original. Wrap this rug about me; I am ashamed now my mask is gone, and I have only the woman's part to play.'

Hugh put the rug about her, and could find nothing eloquent to say for the emo-

tions that agitated him; but he took her hand in his and pressed it, while his joy shone in his eyes, and his silence pleased René better than the most neatly-rounded compliment.

They left the arbour, René and Hugh, and found no one in their path. M. de Gaillefontaine's friends had dispersed, each with the foresight that his company would not be required. René shivered and clung closer to Hugh as her eye caught sight of the rapiers on the grass. Hugh walked slowly, and made René rest upon the first seat they came to. While they were here the alarm of fire was raised; the outcry of many voices came to their ear, and through the light foliage they saw a column of smoke rising. By the time they reached the edge of the lawn, flame was shooting up through the skylight at the back of the stage; the maskers were yet struggling from the door

with painful slowness, whilst over their heads the smoke rolled in rapidly-increasing volume. Some were waiting by the door, looking eagerly for friends, and impeding their exit; others were walking away, congratulating such as were escaped.

René watched the outflowing throng with terrible anxiety, as each instant made the condition more perilous. She felt responsible for the lives of those she had gathered there. At length when the stream ceased to flow, and all were gathered in a noisy crowd upon the lawn in safety, René fell to laughing immoderately, and as suddenly began to cry, covering her face with her hands, and turning her back upon the fire.

'Take me away! take me away!' she sobbed. 'All goes ill that I do. Nothing that I touch escapes calamity.'

Whispering words of comfort and as-

surance, Hugh led her across the lawn towards the lodge, keeping himself between her and the burning building. He saw that last man come out; and the movement towards the back of the theatre which followed led him to suppose that disaster was attended by loss of life. Some such apprehension René seemed to catch from the cry raised as John Smith staggered from the theatre, and she cried and sobbed afresh, while her legs shook under her, refusing to carry her farther.

Once more Hugh took her up in his arms; she, poor thing, nearly unconscious through fright and exhaustion, offered no opposition. Hugh rested at the gatekeeper's lodge, expecting to obtain assistance, but the door was fast, and the gatekeeper gone with the rest up to the blazing theatre. Here René gathered strength, but she clung strenuously to Hugh's shoulder;

and he, drawing the rug more closely about her to shield her from observation, put his arm round her and half carried her through the Quarry Wood, and right down to the Ferry-boat in the village.

The woman of the inn took René away from him, and bade him go find her maids; and Hugh unwillingly submitted to their dispensation, which he, knowing nothing of what was best to do, had to believe right and proper.

He found the fire, swept steadily by the breeze, which seemed to have risen at its bidding, had laid hold upon the house, and those who had been removing the more easily moved valuables from the rooms before the smoke became unendurable were now watching the progress of destruction. There was water close by enough to quench a dozen burning cities, and hundreds of hands willing to serve; but the engines,

which alone could make human will effective, did not arrive until there was nothing to save. In two hours René's palace was reduced to a shapeless pile of rubbish, and her fairy garden trampled and torn into a brown waste.

This climax was told to René by her maids, and from them she learnt how Monsieur de Gaillefontaine was burnt to death, and with him another man. Homeless she wept in this very room years ago on that first day of her arriving at Riverford; homeless she wept there now.

Though René had showed herself possessed of a man's fortitude and courage, she was now for all to see the weakest of women. She was still hysterical and talked wildly, with a fierce unthinking excitement, when Hugh again saw her. She would become a sister, and go into the dreadful hospitals, and do good. She would return to

France. All that she possessed should be given to the deserving; she herself would wear stuff dresses and thick flat boots. A dozen such protestations she made, but to one thing she was constant: she would stay no longer in Riverford, but would this very day leave it. Suddenly conscious of her weakness, she turned to Hugh, and said, her sweet eyes filling with tears,

'I know I am a foolish silly child, but it is to such poor weak things that kind souls are indulgent. Do take me from here; you, my cousin, the only one who can care for me!'

Fearing that illness would follow the violent excitement to which the poor girl had been so subjected, and anxious to have the best assistance at hand, Hugh took René to London by a midday train, with her maids and such luggage as could be collected from the heterogeneous mass of

salvage. René went to the hotel she had previously used, and the women banished Hugh as before, and put their sinking patient to bed.

The immediate control of the estate René had placed in the hands of Mr. Bruce, De Gaillefontaine's secretary. He, anxious for a permanent promotion, was zealous in furthering Miss Biron's interests.

When the fire was threatening the house, he repaired to De Gaillefontaine's rooms, and cleared them of all he considered valuable. The little leathern bag lying beside the Ulster attracted his attention, and its weight induced him to remove it. He opened it when, later in the day, it became evident that De Gaillefontaine was one of those burnt in the theatre; and the contents he himself took to Reading and paid into the bank to René's account.

'John Smith' had disappeared—possibly

not liking the society of certain gentlemen, among the spectators of the fire, whom he had seen before in their magisterial capacity—and all endeavours to find him were unavailing. But when it grew dark the man presented himself at the Ferry-boat, and asked to see Miss Biron.

Mr. Bruce, luckily at that time in the house, pounced upon him, took him aside, heard what he had to say, promised perfect secrecy, and the next morning carried him to London and to Miss Biron's hotel.

Hugh had called to see René, and promised to return; and she, to receive him, had overruled the objection of her attendants, and risen from her bed, giving instructions that visitors were to be sent to her sitting-room. She was astonished when Mr. Bruce and 'John Smith' were ushered in.

'I should have avoided anything which might serve to revive the recollection of

yesterday's painful event,' Mr. Bruce explained, 'but that the occasion seemed too urgent for delay. This is the man who escaped from the fire.'

René said she would hear all that was to be told in as few words as possible; and, bowing her head, endeavoured to listen, calmly and with fortitude, to details which she knew must shock her.

Mr. Bruce signalled to 'John Smith,' who said, with some difficulty in finding words for his purpose,

'It's like this. I'm a man that ain't got any friends, and I don't want to get into trouble just as the season's coming on, when a man can earn a living pretty comfortably; and as I've come for'ard of my own free will, when there wasn't any call for me so to do, no more'n a want to do the thing that's right towards the dead, I hope you won't take advantage of my position to have

me lagged after I've said what I got to say.'

'You do not wish to be detained after you have made your statement—that is what you mean, I think,' said René.

'Just so, miss. It's like this. About a week ago Master Fox—I don't know whether you know him, miss—used to be at the house afore you came, in the old gentleman's time.'

'I remember him.'

'He comes to me and says as he goes in danger of his life because of this here Frenchman, Mounseer de Gaillefontaine, and he hires me to protect him when he went out a-walking. Well, miss, business being slack, and the job a honest one, I undertook it. One day he goes for a walk with this mounseer, and I follows, keeping a heye on him. Sure enough, when they got into Quarry Wood, side o' the pit there,

mounseer takes the old gentleman and tries to shove him over the rails. Of course I did my bounden duty; but whilst I was holding of this mounseer, Master Fox he took a little bag hidden under the French gentleman's shirt, declaring it was hisn. Business took me up here in Lunnon, and strange enough I met Master Fox, who was quite delighted to see me, as he wanted me to protect him again, as he was invited to your ball and couldn't refuse you. Master Fox and the Frenchy met each other quite pleasant and agreeable, and, from what I heered, offered to sell him the very bag as he took away from him last week, and which, so's it shouldn't be taken from him, Master Fox had gave me to take care on. This here Gaillefontaine says, "Meet me on this terrace at six o'clock, and I'll let you know for certain whether I'll buy it or whether I won't," he says. At six—rather afore than

after—mounseer comes wrapped up in a cloak all of a hurry, as if he'd forgotten us; but when Master Fox asks him if he wants to buy the bag, he says, "Oh, yes, I will. Foller me," he says, "to where we can talk private," says he. He took us into that theatre by the back door, leads us into a little room, and locks us in. Then he sets fire to the shavings on the floor, intending to burn us there, and escape by the door he had come in by. But whilst he was getting a light Master Fox had taken the keys out of the door; and when we bust out and he come back for 'em, it was too late to get to the door for the fire, and so we was all caught in the trap together. I was the only one who escaped.'

René lifted her eyes and listened aghast, but with a sensible relief. Hitherto a vague impression haunted her that she in some manner was implicated in the death of De Gaillefontaine.

'John Smith' took a bag from his pocket, and continued,

'Now, miss, it ain't for me to judge them two men, cruel as that Frenchman acted towards us, and their sufferings is enough to take the spite out of any one's heart, and, moreover, I took a solemn oath when I was, like a miracle, delivered from that awful fire, as I'd never do nothing wrong no more. And I've kept my oath. I ain't so much as looked at this bag; and as you're the only party as I know any way connected with them there dead men, I give it into your hands, hoping it won't lead me into trouble.'

René took the bag with some hesitation, and drew from it the folded parchment, on which was neatly pasted the two crumpled, torn, dirty halves of Gregory Biron's last will. Her astonishment as she read, and the reflections that followed the reading, so

absorbed her mind, that she forgot the men, until a movement of Mr. Bruce's broke off her reverie. She dismissed them, bidding Mr. Bruce reward 'John Smith' for his trouble with liberality.

When they were gone she became eagerly impatient for the coming of Hugh; and when she was told that he had promised to return in a couple of hours, and since promising little more than an hour had elapsed, she sent for a cab, and declining attendance, was conveyed to Charlroy Street. The woman of the house remembered her.

'I don't think he'll want you, miss,' said she. 'He's been sadly put out about something since you used to sit to him, and he can't settle down to anything this morning. He's been in and out two or three times, and now he's out. However, I daresay his studio's unlocked, and if so you can sit

there till he comes in; if so be it's locked, you can come down and sit with me in the kitchen. He's a'most sure to be back presently.'

The key was in the lock. She opened the door, but paused upon the threshold, as familiar details of the room revived the feelings of the past. She could regard these feelings now with nothing but regret and shame. Something more than mere curiosity took her to the easel, and made her uncover the picture upon it. She sat upon the stool, and looked long and steadfastly at this portrait of herself, and as she looked, there came joy and pride and love into her heart. This face, in which were nobility and purity and truth, and all that makes a woman's face divine, reflected Hugh's thought of her. These virtues he saw in her in spite of all she had done to make him think her silly and weak, and

even worse than that. Still looking upon the portrait, her bosom swelled with a great hope, a great belief that she should yet prove the truth of all Hugh had painted on that canvas.

The door below opened and shut, and René rose with a heart beating high as some one came bounding up the stairs two at a time.

'I was told at the hotel you had left,' explained Hugh; 'and my heart told me you had come here.'

'Your heart never does me wrong.'

'It never deceives me.'

'Yet what will you say when you know that I have been foolishly wickedly wasting your money for months and months past?'

'If I were convinced that you had been wasting it, and that it really was mine, then I daresay I should say that you had used it, thinking it your own.'

'Who is happier, better for the money I have spent? A heap of ruins is all I can show for my stewardship. See, this shows that the wealth was yours.'

Hugh took the paper with some curiosity, and said, smiling,

'So this is the will about which there has been so much fuss. Why, this paper does not assure me that the money was mine! Legally it is no will at all, I expect; certainly it would give me no moral claim.'

René seated herself, and in silent wonder looked up at Hugh.

'Do you know that this paper was taken from my friend, De Gaillefontaine?'

'Yes.'

'And yet with the possibility, nay, the probability, that I shared his knowledge of the contents, you steadily painted truth and goodness in that portrait!'

'I have need of some virtues, if it be only decent generosity; for within two days you have given me a life and a fortune; and I have it in my heart to ask yet more of you.'

René hung her head, for she knew the meaning of his words; and as he stepped towards her, she sprang from her chair, and flung her arms about his neck, vowing he should not kneel at her feet. She gave him her lips to kiss, closing her eyes in passionate delight. Then she burst into tears, being yet so weak and shaken, and between her sobs told how she would be a good and wise wife under his guidance, beginning her new life with humility and faith.

THE END.

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